

Bandwagon

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JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2000



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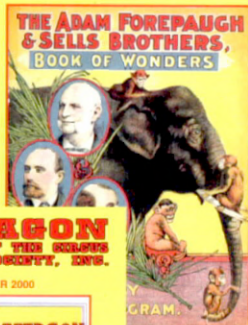
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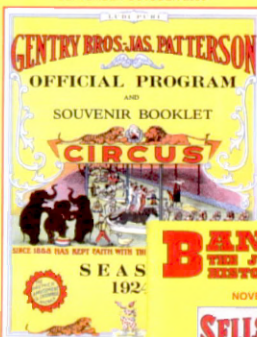
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For a limited time only the Circus Historical Society is offering all six 2000 *Bandwagons* for only \$25.00, about half the listed price.

IRWIN BROS. CHEYENNE FRONTIER DAYS WILD WEST SHOW

By Fred D. Pfening, Jr.

August 1, 1899 was the final day of the 10th Cheyenne Frontier Days. The Daddy of 'em All. This exhibition and a Cheyenne cowboy were intertwined in a wild west show that took the road in 1910. It differed from the others as it was basically a traveling rodeo.

Charles Burton Irwin, the man who headed the show, was born in 1875 in Cheyenne, Wyoming. He was employed by a local Nebraska newspaper at the time he met the supply agent at Fort Yates, North Dakota. A year later Irwin returned to Cheyenne and went to work as a blacksmith. He worked as a cowboy at a large ranch, near the Union Pacific Railroad as a live stock agent. Taking advantage of the National Homestead Act he bought indigenous parcels of land in

Montana, the Irwins were wealthy land owners, operating a ten thousand acre cattle ranch. On January 16, 1900 Irwin incorporated the Irwin Brothers Live Stock Company in Wyoming. The corporate office of incorporation, listed as Charles B. Irwin, Frank R. Irwin and William B. Irwin, was in Cheyenne. Irwin, known as Will, did not travel with the show but remained at the ranch. The capital stock was \$100,000, divided in 1,000 shares with a par value of \$100 per share. The name of the corporation was later changed to the Irwin Live Stock and Show Company.



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In 2000 *Bandwagon* published articles on the Irwin Bros. Wild West, Millie-Christina, Frank A. Robbins, the Monte Carlo Festival, equestrian Rhoda Royal, flyer Fay Alexander, reviews of both the 1900 and 1999 circus seasons, Commodore Nutt, Dennie Curtis, elephants named Columbus, and so much more.

THE CIRCUS YEAR IN REVIEW 1999 SEASON

BY FRED D. PFENING, JR.

The final year of the century saw the stock market go through the roof and unemployment near 40% all time high with increased welfare dependence. Gross income of nation per person rose 20% and the nation's gross domestic product rose 10%.

How did circus business fare in this great economy? It was a mixed bag for show owners. Generally those with good marketing programs did okay, but it was also necessary to have efficient and good management.

The circus season was changed in 1999 that taking the Great Wallenda. Hendricks Bros. Circus did not tour in 1999. Children bought an elephant named D. R. Miller. Dick Garden, touring his larger "Nighting and Bird" circus, had a great affection for the elephant. At one time he owned fifty of them, most touring with his circus, as much or more than anyone else in the history of the circus.

Dave Price, Stuart Thayer, Robert Sabia, Dan Draper, William Slout, Fred Pfening III, Steve Gossard, Joe Bradbury and Fred Pfening, Jr. were among the authors in these issues.

A complete listing of 2000 articles and authors can be found in the *Bandwagon* index on the CHS web site at circushistory.org

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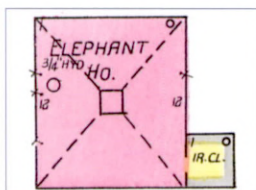


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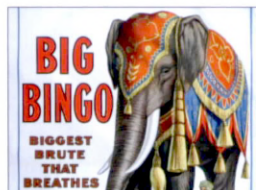


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"To preserve, promote, and share through education the history and cultural significance of the circus and allied arts, past and present."

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From the Editor

In the months between the departure of the elephants from the Greatest Show on Earth and the announcement of the closing of the Ringling show, Greg Parkinson suggested that the importance of the elephants to the best recognized title in American circus was a topic worthy of a dedicated issue of *Bandwagon*. Greg and his daughter, CHS Board member Julie Parkinson, undertook a massive project researching the elephants that performed under the combined title, gathering information from programs, route books, as well as from men and women who worked with the animals. Julie and her father also transcribed some of their interviews to include in the journal. While undertaking all of that work, Greg also gathered more contributions to round out this issue. Two additional CHS board members, poster expert Chris Berry and Circus World Archivist Peter Shrake, brought their own expertise to provide an overview of the importance of elephants to the history of the Greatest Show on Earth. With more recent developments, the significance of the elephants' retirement became even clearer.

Along with the authors, a number of other individuals deserve thanks for their part in making this issue possible. Mary Jane Miller, Richard "Doc" Houck, and Mark Oliver Gebel gave generously of their time, speaking with Julie and Greg to share some of their unique perspectives on working with elephants. The staff of Milner Library, particularly Mark Schmitt and Maureen Brunsdale, helped supply us with images, as did Pete Shrake from Circus World, Amy Fulkerson from the Witte Museum, and the staff of the Ringling Museum. John and Mardi Wells have once again put their energy, patience, and talent into laying out another beautiful issue. And last, but certainly not least, Fred Dahlinger has assisted in reviewing material.

I am grateful to Greg Parkinson for his dedication to making this issue possible. From reviewing all of the material and assisting with the editorial tasks of image identification, content review, to consulting on layout, Greg has more than earned the recognition of Co-Editor for this issue of *Bandwagon*.

JLP

About the front cover

by Chris Berry

Most circus posters were created anonymously, but this particular two-sheet poster is one of several that the famed French poster artist Henri Gray [Henri Boulanger 1848-1924] created for the Barnum & Bailey tour of France in 1902. This lithograph, along with many others used to promote *The Greatest Show on Earth in France*, was printed by Courmont Freres in Paris.

Although Courmont produced many fine original lithographs for the circus, including several by the acclaimed French poster artist Henri Gray, the printer also reproduced a number of designs that were originally created by the American show printers Strobridge and Courier.

While he is best known for his posters advertising bicycles, Henri Gray's artistic eye and his impressionistic perspective on the circus is quite stunning. His poster designs for French circuses, including the *Cirque d'Ete*, clearly show the influence of French Impressionism. Finely rendered figures, printed in muted tones, are set against less detailed backgrounds. Bold shades of red and blue are used sparingly to add emphasis.

For the Barnum & Bailey show, Gray's designs went further, minimizing the range of color to allow bold and iconic images of performers to visually pop from the print. Imagine seeing this lithograph on the side of a building in Marseilles or Dijon during the summer of 1902. "*Voila!*" Simple and striking, it is a powerful message of what is coming.

The cover photo is from the Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



About the back cover

by Greg Parkinson

The Novello family performed in Barnum & Bailey's center ring in 1907. This photograph taken during rehearsal time in Madison Square Garden recorded two of the Novellos completing an amazing handstand column on a young elephant's head as the elephant named Sultan executed the same maneuver on one of the act's special tubs. This Parisian novelty act featured elephants, ponies, and dogs that the family brought with them from Europe. The troupe was comprised of "Papa" Novello who directed the act and his five children – four sons and one daughter. Note the young woman in the photo has a taut cord stabilizing her wrists, thus reducing the possibility of her hands slipping from the elephant's head. The man standing in the ring concentrating on the incredible column of balance is wearing Novello act wardrobe, but it is unclear if he is "Papa" Novello or Barnum & Bailey Elephant Superintendent Harry Mooney.

Even more improbable was another towering column performed by The Novellos. As Sultan sat on a tub, one young man did a handstand on the elephant's forehead. Another boy completed a second handstand on the lower acrobat's up-stretched feet. A dog was raised on a small wooden disk on a long pole, and in turn the dog stepped over to sit on its hind legs on the upper acrobat's upturned feet. And on top of all of that, a rooster was elevated to perch on the dog's head.

The Novellos also included an elephant teeterboard vault in their routine. As *Harper's Weekly* noted in its April 6, 1907 issue, "The cleverest elephant walks a seesaw, which comes down smack! and sends a smiling Novello boy somersaulting through the air over the elephant's body." Other documentation indicated that the vaulter landed on his feet on a pillow-like mat that was placed in front of the elephant.

back cover photo from Sauk County
Historical Society, Baraboo, WI

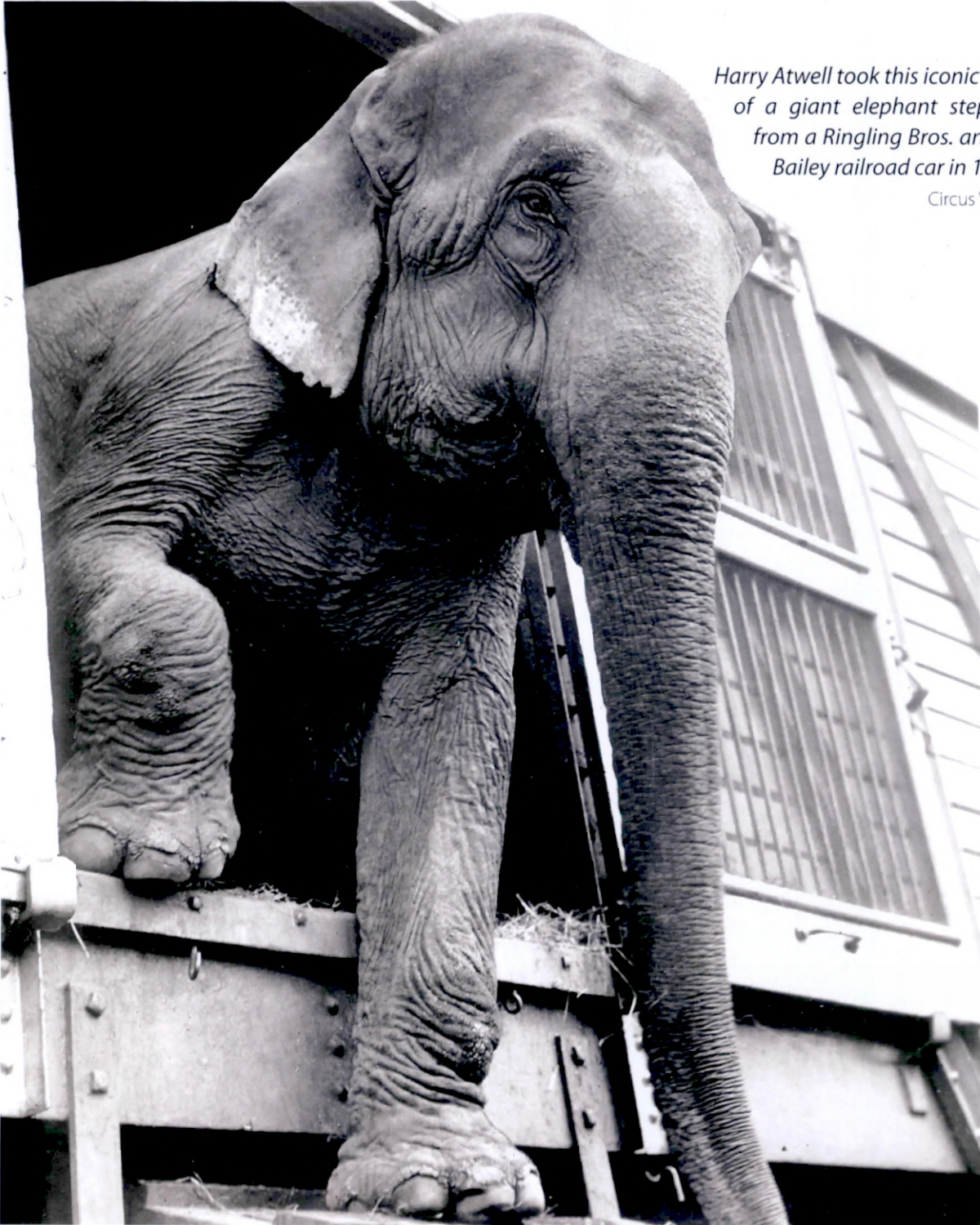
The elephant house today in Baraboo, WI. Read about its history as Peter Shrake takes us on a tour starting on page 38.

image courtesy of Circus World Museum

When Elephants Came to Town

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey 1919-2016

by Greg Parkinson and Julie Parkinson



Harry Atwell took this iconic photograph of a giant elephant stepping down from a Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey railroad car in 1943.

Circus World Museum



During a bygone era, children offer peanuts to the outstretched trunks of elephants in the Ringling Bros. menagerie in 1913. Note the uniformed handler at the far left carefully monitoring the male tusker. Ringling's herd included three males at the time – Sammy, Rio and Big John.

Greg Parkinson collection

The front page headline of *USA Today* read “Final Bow: Elephant Act Ends after 145 years.”¹ The accompanying account reported that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey had presented its 11 Asian elephants for the last time during separate performances in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island on Sunday, May 1, 2016. With those Red and Blue unit performances, the era of Ringling-Barnum elephants came to a close.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Barnum, Bailey, their partners, and the Ringlings showcased elephants in every corner of the country. They enjoyed tremendous success presenting featured attractions such as Jumbo, Baby Bridgeport, and Big Bingo. Season after season, millions marveled at the sight of elephants parading down Main Street. Circus goers were tickled by elephants enthusiastically accepting handouts of peanuts in the menagerie. They were also, of course, awed by elephant antics under the big top.

This article, however, does not review that earlier era of The Greatest Show on Earth and the Ringling's World's Greatest Shows. Rather, it strives to relate the highlights of but one chapter in the history of circus elephants, picking up the story at the time when America's two most famous circus titles were combined. Each year from 1919

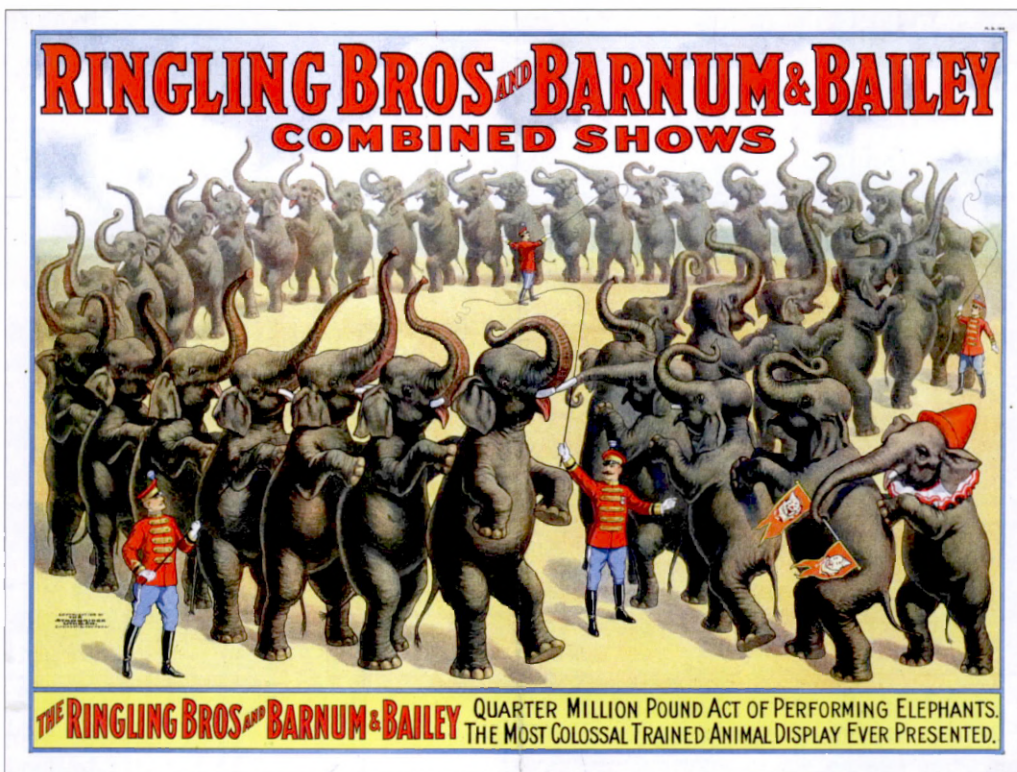
on, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey always included these magnificent four-footed giants in its performing lineup. That glorious era lasted for just short of a century.

The inaugural Ringling-Barnum performance took place on Friday, March 21 in New York's storied Madison Square Garden. It was reviewed by *The Billboard* under a bold headline that read “The Circus Colossal combining the two unequaled Institutions of the Show World.”² The review began by noting that the “Ringling's claim to the title of The World's First Super Circus is not exaggerated in the least.” It went on to explain that the panoramic themed spectacles of past years had been set aside in favor of an opening parade of performers and animals around the arena. That was a good

thing according to the writer due to the tired and somewhat hokey format of those former theatrical productions.

The first display to follow the Grand Introductory Pageant consisted of a multitude of performing elephants in the circus rings. The reviewer noted “the telephone bit being especially clever” and “how the kids did love these elephants.” Then the writer made a prophecy. “Just as sure as the skies are above us, and just as sure as is the law of gravitation, just so sure it is that the circus will live forever, as long as they have elephants.”³

Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Shows had featured 26 elephants under the direction of George Denman in 1918. The Barnum & Bailey herd ranged from 18 to 20 that same year.⁴ Denman was placed in charge of the combined herd of 38 elephants⁵ that toured with the new Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey enterprise in 1919. The souvenir program for the under-canvas tour acknowledged five elephant presenters – Denman in the center ring, Charles Herbert, Bert Patridge, George Hennessy, and Fred Baker. At the conclusion of the ring performances, all of the elephants were brought in line in “an imposing finale on the hippodrome oval.”⁶ Such long mounts provided a thrilling sight at Ringling-Barnum performances for the next 10 decades.



Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey one sheet poster printed by Strobridge Lithographing Company, 1919.

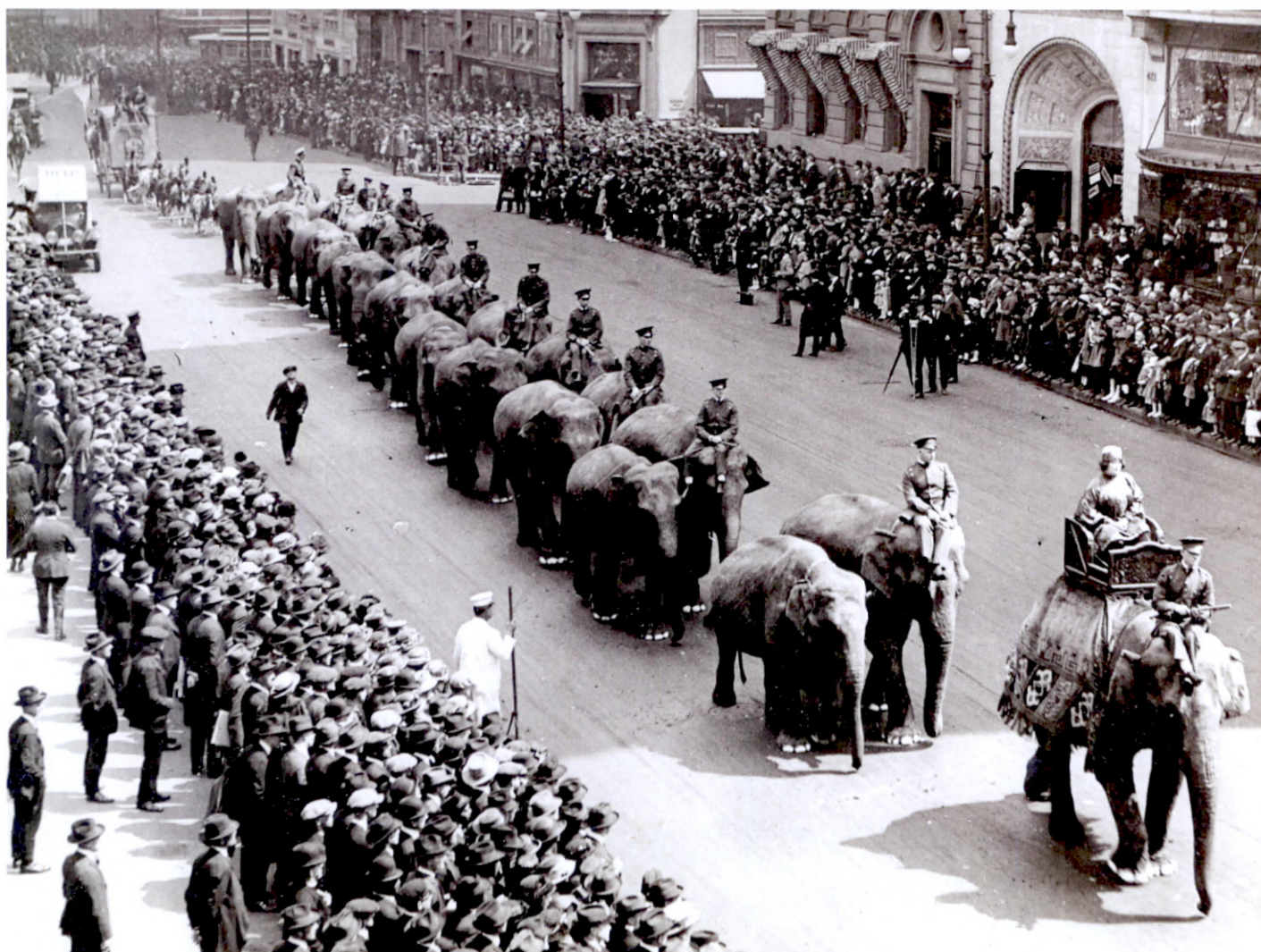
Circus World Museum

George "Deafy" Denman first joined Barnum & Bailey in 1888. He went to Australia with the Sells Bros. Circus elephants in 1891. He was back with The Greatest Show on Earth during its five-year tour of Europe at the turn of the century. He worked for the acclaimed Barnum & Bailey elephant trainer Harry Mooney through 1909. He became Barnum & Bailey's elephant superintendent in 1910, took over the Ringling-owned Forepaugh-Sells elephants soon thereafter, and moved to the Ringling show in 1912. Denman, whose nickname was attributed to him being nearly deaf, continued as superintendent of the Ringling-Barnum herd



On a blustery spring day at the Bridgeport, Connecticut winter quarters, the 38 elephants of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey herd were assembled for this photograph. The date is uncertain, but the photo was taken just prior to the New York engagement in 1919, 1920 or 1921.

Greg Parkinson collection



The elephants were always a popular feature of circus street parades. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey discontinued its daily parade after the 1920 season. However, huge crowds turned out to see the special processions staged in New York City in 1921 and 1923 to benefit the Milk Fund, a charity backed by Mrs. William Randolph Hearst. This photo of the NYC Milk Fund parade is dated as 1921, although this has not been confirmed.

Fred Dahlinger collection

until the beginning of the 1933 "Golden Anniversary" season. He became ill during the New York engagement, his health forcing him into retirement. He died four years later in Bridgeport, Connecticut.⁷

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey continued the tradition of staging daily horse-drawn street parades during the first two seasons of its combined format. Big horse-drawn parades were also presented in New York City in connection with Milk Fund drives during the 1921 and 1923 engagements. The gigantic elephant herd was, of course, part of those grand free promotional marches. Thereafter, Ringling-Barnum parades were rare and usually associated with the likes of war bond drives and U. S. postage stamp releases. Ringling's elephants, however, never

stopped parading. They continued to march in lumbering formation from the train to each lot or building where the circus played.

Reviews of the 1922 opening in Madison Square Garden noted that 34 elephants were viewed in the basement menagerie.⁸ The performance included five elephants in each of three rings. These elephants danced, played baseball, and formed massive pyramids⁹ with two-high pedestals in the center. Nine more elephants joined in on the hippodrome track where the two dozen elephants did simultaneous hind leg stands.

Six very young baby elephants were received at the Bridgeport, Connecticut winter quarters on November 5, 1922. Included were Bingo, Mary, Joe, Alice, Marcella



George "Deafy" Denman presented the center ring elephants in 1924 as the other five acts worked in the end rings.

Circus World Museum

and Emma.¹⁰ These babies were trained by Denman during the winter months. The following spring saw the debut of "the Tiny Tommy Tinkers, the world's smallest elephant

herd. In fact, Marcella was still performing on the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Blue Unit in 1976.¹⁴ She died in the winter quarters in Venice, Florida the next year after having performed with The Greatest Show on Earth for 54 consecutive years.

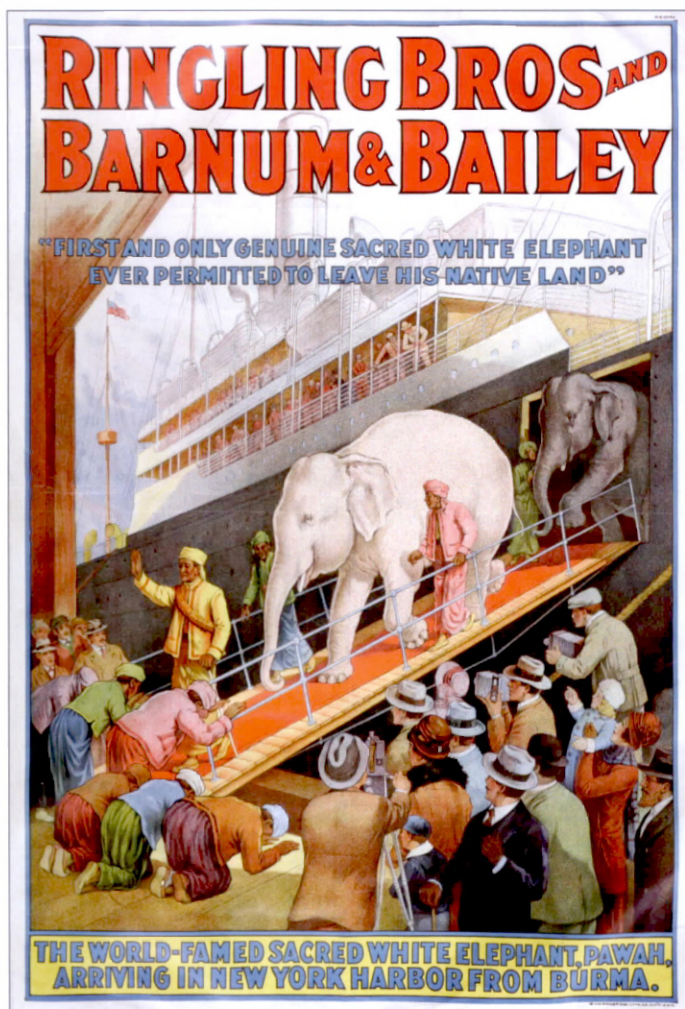


The Tiny Tommy Tinkers are led out of the big top after a performance in 1923. The six baby elephants were trained by Deafy Denman at the Bridgeport winter quarters after being received in November, 1922.

Circus World Museum, Harry Atwell photograph, Don Howland scrapbook

actors."¹¹ The stage name of this group of little elephants was copied from a 1911 Ringling Bros. feature of virtually the same name. Tiny Tom Tinker had been billed as an elephant that looked like a toy and one "you could almost put in your pocket."¹² Advertising also referred to the 1922 additions to the performance as simply the "baby elephants from India." Nine additional young elephants were purchased in November 1923.¹³ Together these 15 young acquisitions helped to endow the future of the Ringling-Barnum elephant

In November of 1919, Dr. Saw Durang Po Min had captured a male albino elephant in Burma that was about one and a half years old. He named his "white" elephant Pawah. In the summer of 1926, Dr. Po Min took Pawah to the London Zoo where he was exhibited on the same grounds where Jumbo had given rides to English children 45 years earlier. Charles and John Ringling became interested in Pawah. For the 1927 season – the last for which the show was framed in Bridgeport – the two



Strobridge printed this one sheet poster for the 1927 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey display of Pawah.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

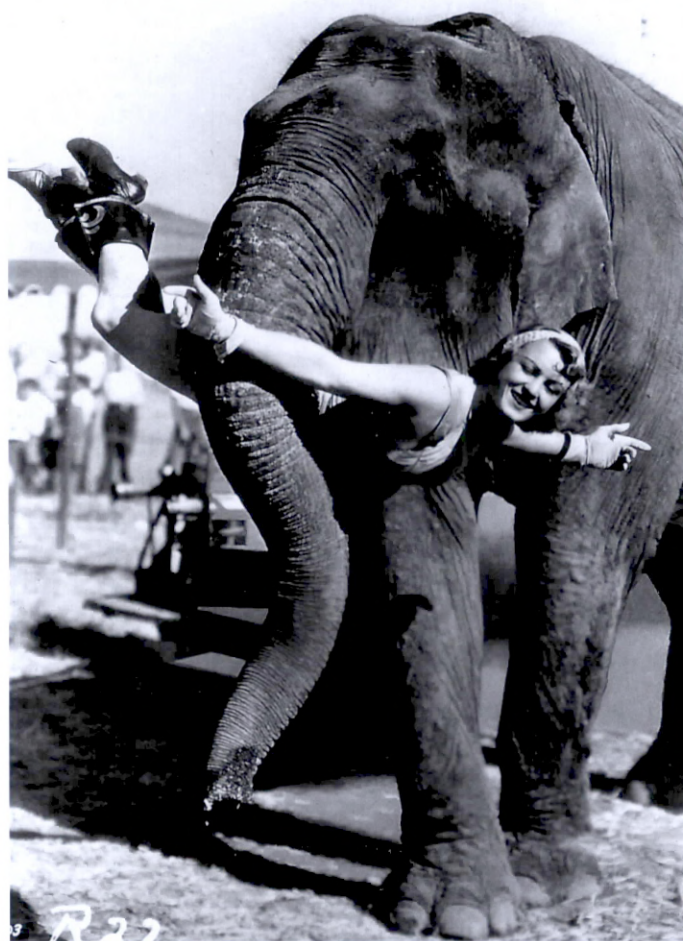
brothers set out to reprise the white elephant features of the late 19th century (Barnum & London had toured a white elephant named Toung Taloung for four seasons beginning in 1884; and Ringling Bros. had promoted its own white elephant, Keddah, in 1897 and 1898). The Ringlings reached an agreement with Dr. Po Min for an American tour. Sadly, Charles did not live to see the debut of the new white elephant sensation. He died on December 3, 1926.

Pawah was shipped to the United States, arriving in New York with his owner toward the end of 1926. Posters designed to promote the 1927 tour depicted a very white Asian elephant and claimed Pawah was the "First and only genuine sacred white elephant ever permitted to leave his native land." Pawah was indeed a genuine albino elephant, although his actual color was reported to be a grayish white.¹⁵ He was exhibited in the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey menagerie accompanied by "a half dozen Burmese

attendants."¹⁶ After the end of that one season, Dr. Po Min took his charge to a zoo in Calcutta, India.

One of the more unique elephant acts to appear on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey during the post-World War I era made its debut in 1928. Although the show carried 34 elephants that year – 25 of which appeared in the performance – it was a single elephant that immediately followed the large elephant act that garnered special attention. This lone elephant worked with her trainer, a mahout from India. *Billboard* described the act as follows:

"Augmenting the regular elephant acts, the circus offers something of a vastly different nature in the center ring, with Gunga, a Hindu, doing an



Yasso and her mahout, Gunga, were brought to the United States to appear with Ringling-Barnum in 1928. Gunga performed with his elephant for three seasons and then returned to India. Yasso remained with the show's elephant herd through 1935. This Atwell photo shows the elephant grasping Erika Loyal c. 1932.

Circus World Museum, Don Howland
small Atwell RB&BB photo scrapbook

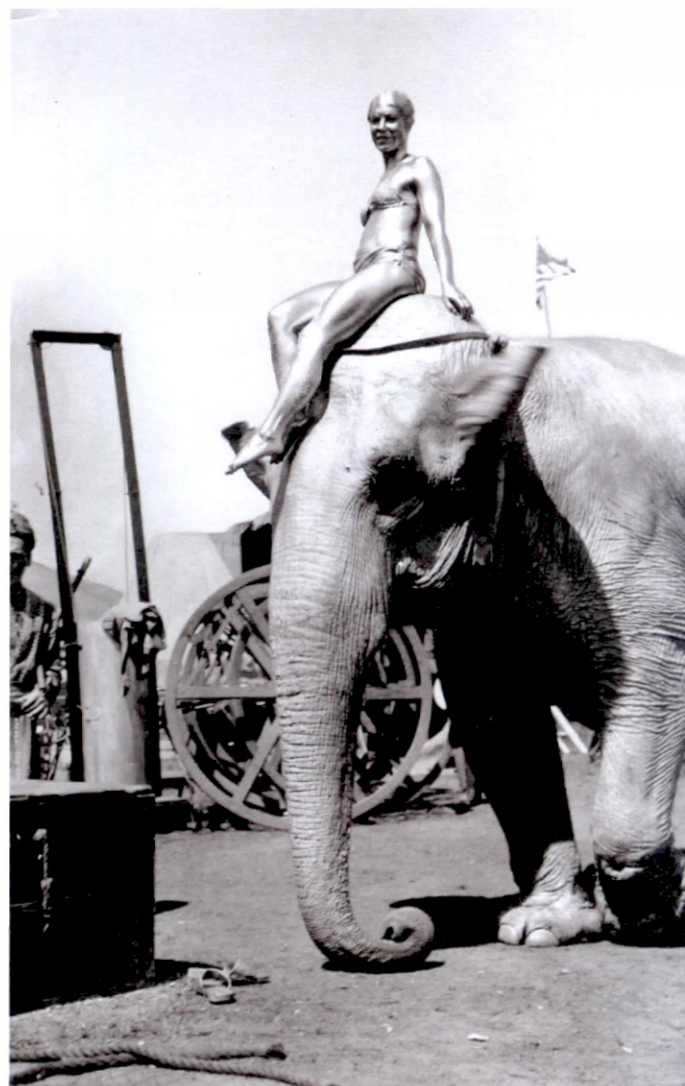
absorbingly interesting act in which his elephant, Yasso, carries him about the ring in his mouth. This elephant is the very incarnation of carefulness, as he picks up his master and paces with watchful and sure step about the circle in which he works. Gunga is first held in the jaws of Yasso by his leg, then by his body, and later by his head.”¹⁷

The following year Gunga and Yasso were presented on the front hippodrome track. The circus program called the act “the East India Sensation – a startling performance” in which the trainer is carried down the track by his head in the mouth of the elephant.¹⁸ After three seasons, Gunga returned to India, but Yasso remained with Ringling for five more years. Various versions of the act were henceforth accomplished for a few more seasons by others on the show including “Major” James Unger¹⁹ and Erika Loyal.

While the circus was playing Chicago on August 10, 1932, Edith Ringling announced that a veteran elephant would be immediately retired to the Sarasota winter quarters after 45 years of service with the Ringling Bros. Circus.²⁰ *Billboard* reported that “Old Nell, a 76 year old elephant, is now on the ‘pension’ list...said to have been the first elephant ever owned by the Ringling Bros.’ Circus...made a formal bow before Mrs. Charles Ringling...”²¹ The *Chicago Tribune* confirmed the same information from the publicity event.²² However, the stated identity of the retiring elephant does not fully sync with history.

The first elephants owned by the Ringlings were Babylon (a large Asian female later always referred to as Babe) and Fannie (an African female), both purchased in 1888.²³ Babe was still on the show at the time of Old Nell’s retirement in Chicago. Fannie had been sold to George W. Hall in 1910.²⁴ So it would seem that Old Nell was probably not “the first elephant ever owned by the Ringling Bros. Circus” as stated by Mrs. Ringling. In 1896, Ringling Bros. did acquire an elephant named Nellie that came with the Lockhart elephant act from England. That elephant was sold to William P. Hall in 1917 and died in 1922.²⁵ Another Nellie from the Barnum & Bailey show was incorporated into the big herd by Denman in 1919, but that elephant was sold to the Houston Zoo in 1925.²⁶ Yet another Nellie, purchased in 1910 by the Ringling Bros., was in fact on the show in 1932. However, she continued trouping with the Ringling enterprise through 1949.

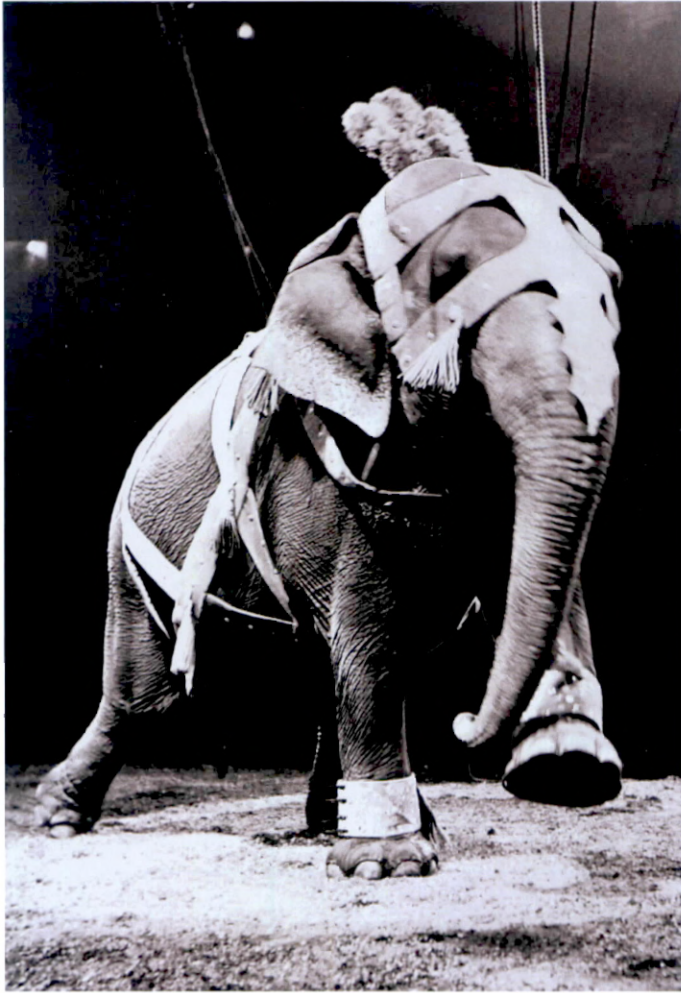
Although Old Nell’s lineage remains a mystery, First-of-May press agent Bev Kelley revealed something of her nature in 1930. In his article published in *Colliers*, Kelley related that “Old Nell” was an extremely intelligent ani-



The Golden Jubilee of the Ringling Bros. Circus was celebrated in 1933. Helen Leslie rode on Modoc at the head of the “Durbar of Delhi” spectacle to open each performance. Both performer and elephant were sprayed gold to help commemorate the 50-year salute.

Circus World Museum

mal that could be quite resourceful and stealthy when she wanted something.²⁷ On one occasion, the Menagerie Superintendent had purchased two large watermelons to savor the following day with his assistants and some of the candy butchers. He placed them in a burlap sack and went to sleep on the ground guarding his treasures. He and the other men were about 30 feet from the line of elephants. After they had gone to sleep – according to Kelley – Old Nell decided to check out the watermelons. The next morning, the men found them missing. Old Nell was standing in her regular place in the menagerie with some incriminating green watermelon remnants resting near her front feet. She



Modoc danced in Ringling-Barnum performances and was a leader of the elephant herd throughout the 1930s and 1940s. She was by all accounts a massive Asian elephant.

Circus World Museum

was still chained to an iron stake, although it was no longer embedded in the ground. The old circus veteran had inaudibly retrieved the burlap sack, carefully creeping back and forth without clanking the stake or chain. Kelley claimed that he had entered the menagerie tent late at night and had actually observed Old Nell carefully stepping between the sleeping men.²⁸ The stake was in her trunk. Kelley did not wake the men at that hour, but did tell them the next day of the unbelievable event he had witnessed.²⁹

The veteran elephant, Babe, rode the Ringling-Barnum train for the last time during the spring of 1934. She was transferred to the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. in May while the show played that city.³⁰ Babe had been with the circus from the wagon show days through the time when Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey traveled on 100 railroad cars. She died at the zoo in September 1937.

Edward Doherty was hired as the new elephant superintendent in early 1933 when Deafy Denman's illness made it impossible for him to continue in that capacity. That year marked the Golden Jubilee of the Ringling Bros. title and Sam Gumpertz's first as Vice President and General Manager. "The Durbar of Delhi" spectacle opened the performance. Leading the procession around the hippodrome track was a Golden Elephant ridden by a gilded performer, Helen Leslie, the duo calling attention to the 50-year anniversary celebration. The elephant was Modoc, an impressive Asian female acquired by John Ringling in 1929.³¹ Not to be confused with two other elephants with the same name that were later acquired by Ringling-Barnum, Modoc weighed in at 9,180 pounds and measured 7' 10" in height in 1935.³²

Modoc made another featured appearance in the Ringling-Barnum performance in 1936. She was introduced as the "4 ton piccolino dancer on the hippodrome track" where she was presented by Erika Loyal.³³ This marked the beginning of more than a decade of solo dancing for Modoc on the track or in the center ring. Captain Lawrence "Larry" Davis took over the herd that numbered 35 elephants that season. He was superintendent for three years.

Another elephant feature of 1936 was that of the so-called pigmy elephants. Five of these forest elephants from West Africa were shipped to the United States early that year, although two did not survive the ocean journey. Those that appeared in the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey menagerie and performance were a male, Congo,



A 1936 poster for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

Circus World Museum



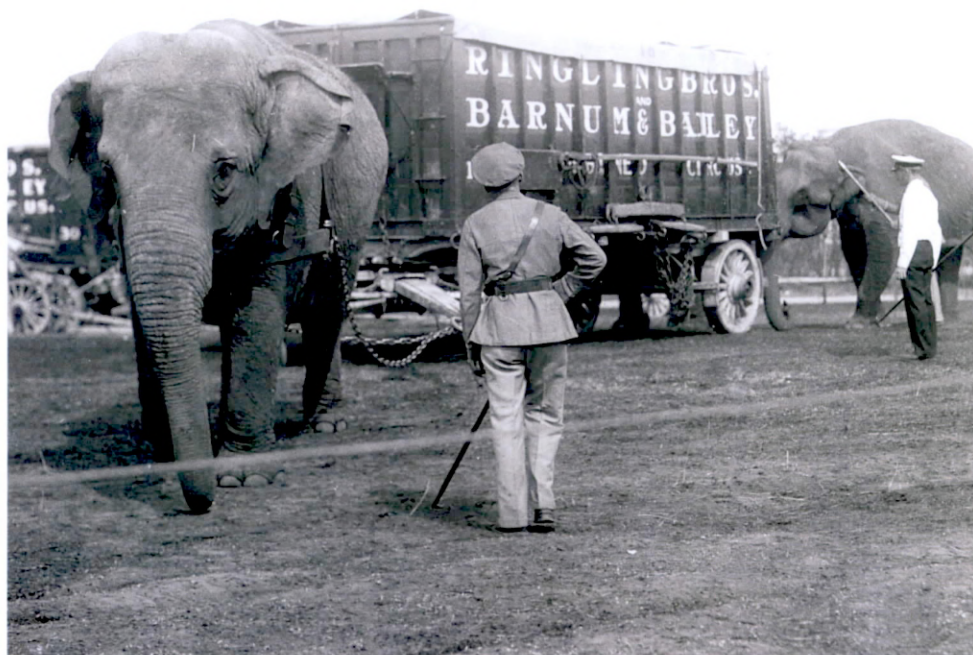
Two harnessed elephants attached to center pole blocks stand by to “pull the peaks” of the big top’s heavy canvas. Each animal seizes the opportunity to graze for a few tufts of grass.

Buckles Woodcock collection

sons – along with the fact that the Gargantua craze overshadowed all other animal features beginning in 1938.

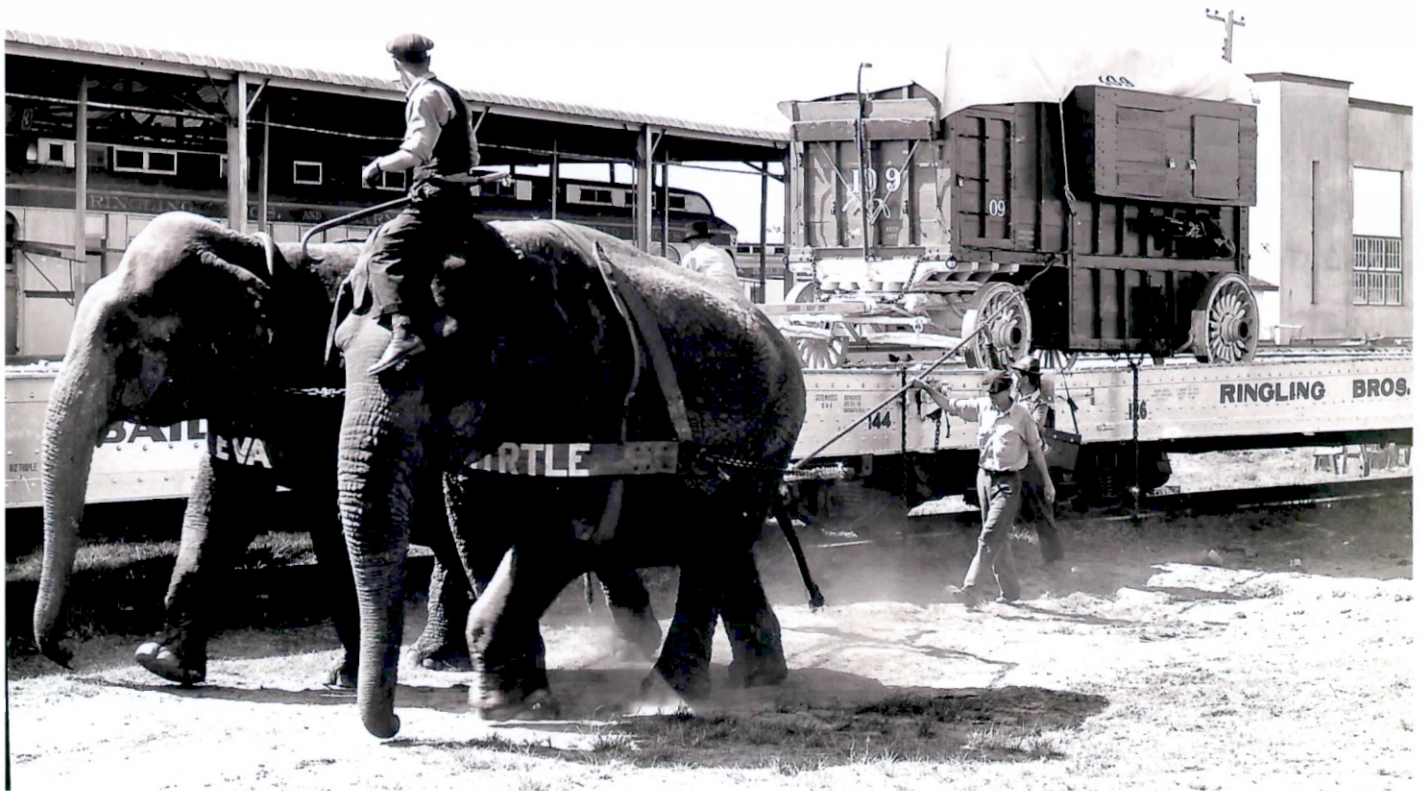
Year in and year out, the elephants on Ringling-Barnum – like virtually all shows of the time – were seen in countless roles on the circus lot. Teams of elephants pulled the peaks of the big top during the set up. Harnessed elephants tugged quarter poles into place. Elephants maneuvered wagons around the lot and provided the extra force needed to extricate wagons mired on soft or muddy lots. When the paying audience entered the menagerie tent, the elephants swayed from side to side. Of course, they played leading roles in the circus performance, but they also pulled floats and wore magnificently

and two females, Pourquois and Sudan. These elephants were indeed small by comparison to the adult Asian elephants on the show. All three had tusks. Congo particularly stood out with his very long thin tusks that seemed “out of proportion” to his body.³⁴ The trio was advertised as being from “Africa’s darkest depths.” The program claimed that they were “the only family of African Pigmy elephants that ever set foot on this continent” and that they were not babies but “full-grown, middle-aged midget tuskers.”³⁵ Congo died during his first winter in Sarasota. After that, the two remaining pigmy elephants could no longer be presented as a full family. This may explain why they were not promoted as heavily during the next few sea-



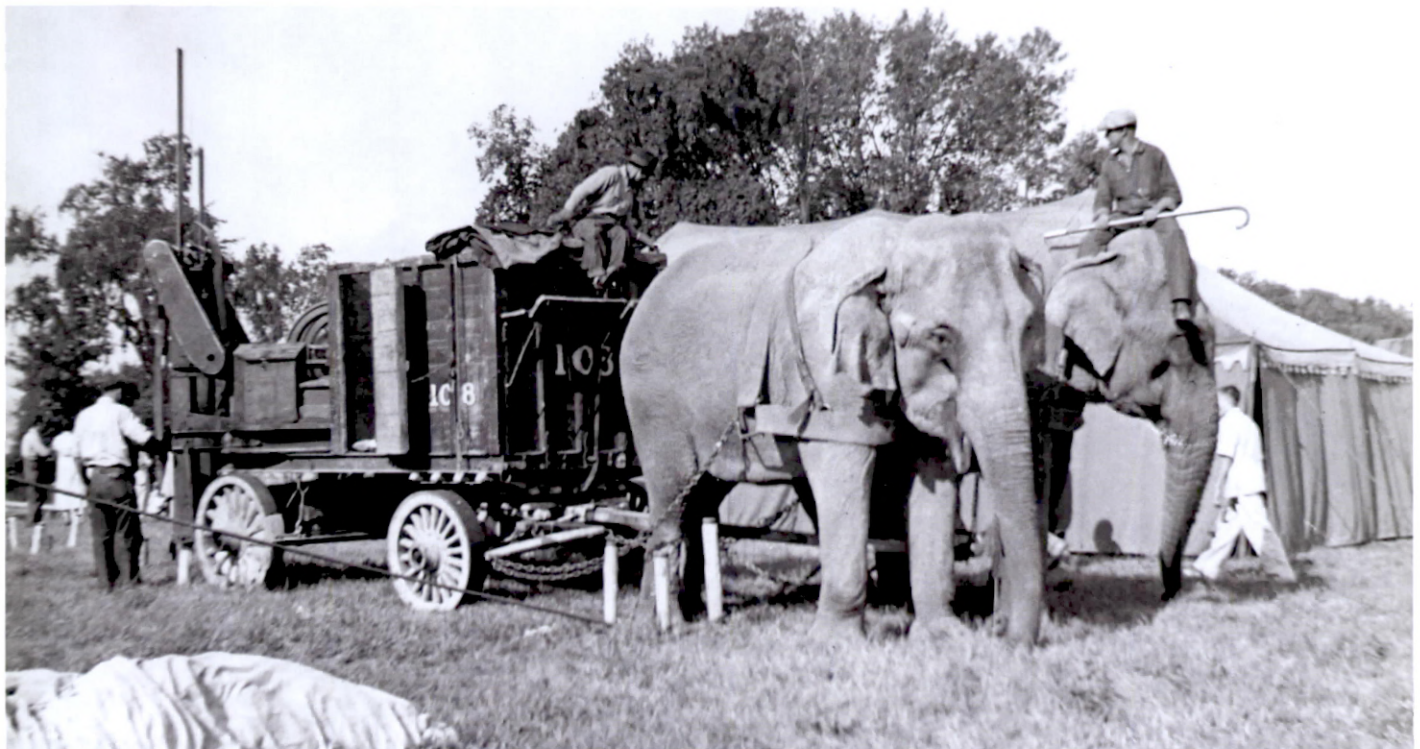
Elephant superintendent Larry Davis oversees the positioning of a large Ringling-Barnum baggage wagon in a scene captured by photographer Harry Atwell in 1937.

Circus World Museum



Eva, one of the nine baby elephants purchased in 1923, and Myrtle, a former Sparks Circus elephant, pair up to load wagons at the Sarasota winter quarters in the spring of 1941. Both elephants were trained for this work by Walter McClain after he took over the Ringling-barnum herd in late 1938.

Circus World Museum



A team of Walter McClain's elephants pause for the command to "move up" as an automatic stake driver is used to pound wooden stakes into the ground on a summer day in 1939.

Greg Parkinson collection

decorated blankets during the spec and finale productions. After the night show was "all out and over," a few of them could be seen in the darkened cavernous interior of the big top pulling quarter poles loose so that they could be lowered to the ground by workmen. For decades, these great creatures played a significant role in the evolution and survival of the circus.

The United States was still feeling the effects of the Great Depression during the early months of 1938. Organized labor seeking more compensation for circus workers had threatened the show in numerous ways from the outset of the season. The Teamsters Union went on strike in Scranton, Pennsylvania on June 22. This forced the show to close and return to Sarasota to reorganize. Subsequently, some of the acts joined the Ringling-Barnum owned Al G. Barnes & Sells-Floto Circus for the balance of the season. Walter McClain (1898-1942) was that show's elephant superintendent. He had held a similar position on Sparks Circus for nine years before joining Al G. Barnes in 1932. When the 1938 tour ended for the enhanced Barnes/Sells-Floto show, it was the end of the line for that circus. Rather than returning to its own winter quarters in California, it was directed by Ringling management to make the "home run" to Sarasota.

Seventeen Barnes/Sells-Floto elephants arrived at the Florida winter quarters along with Walter McClain and his wife, Evelyn. At that time, McClain was placed in charge of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey elephants succeeding Larry Davis.

William Woodcock, Sr. once praised McClain as being "the best elephant man the Ringling show ever had."³⁶ In his first season as superintendent, McClain implemented a plan to use elephants to assist with the unloading of the show's flatcars and to haul wagons to and from the circus lots. McClain had elephants among the 17 he brought to Sarasota that were already experienced in this work, and he trained several more from the Ringling herd before the new season began. Hundreds of baggage horses and about 100 teamsters were able to be replaced. This led to the elimination of many of the railroad cars previously needed to transport those horses and men, resulting in a substantial reduction in the show's operating expenses. McClain's new system employing elephants was used for only a few years until a larger fleet of Caterpillar tractors was placed in service.

Also for the 1939 season, McClain facilitated the addition of an amazing feature for the performance by bring-

ing five of the show's largest elephants in line, shoulder to shoulder on the hippodrome track. The elephants were joined by camels and horses, all serving as a massed obstacle over which the "Incredible Pilades"³⁷ made their acrobatic springboard leaps. The next year Walter and Evelyn McClain, aided by a multitude of elephant handlers, presented a long mount on the hippodrome track with more than 40 elephants! The program set forth that the number was 46, although the actual number of elephants carried by the show in 1940 was recorded as 45.³⁸ It is unclear exactly how many of these normally were included in the long mount.

Tragedy struck the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey elephant herd in late 1941. On November 5 many of the majestic animals became ill in Atlanta. Eleven died – the last succumbing on the 14th in Charleston, South Carolina. It was soon determined that the elephants had experienced



Ballerina and Hollywood actress, Vera Zorina, danced with Modoc in "The Ballet of the Elephants" on opening night, April 9, 1942. Zorina was the wife of the acclaimed Russian dancer, George Balanchine, who choreographed the elephant production. This photograph was taken the same year Zorina appeared in the circus.

A. L. Whitey Shafer photograph, Greg Parkinson collection



The long mount of John Ringling North's "The Ballet of the Elephants" in Madison Square Garden, 1942.

Greg Parkinson collection

some form of poisoning, possibly ingested during one of the two previous stands. Autopsies revealed that it was a form of arsenic. Ultimately, an investigation was unable to conclusively determine how or when the elephants received the poison.³⁹

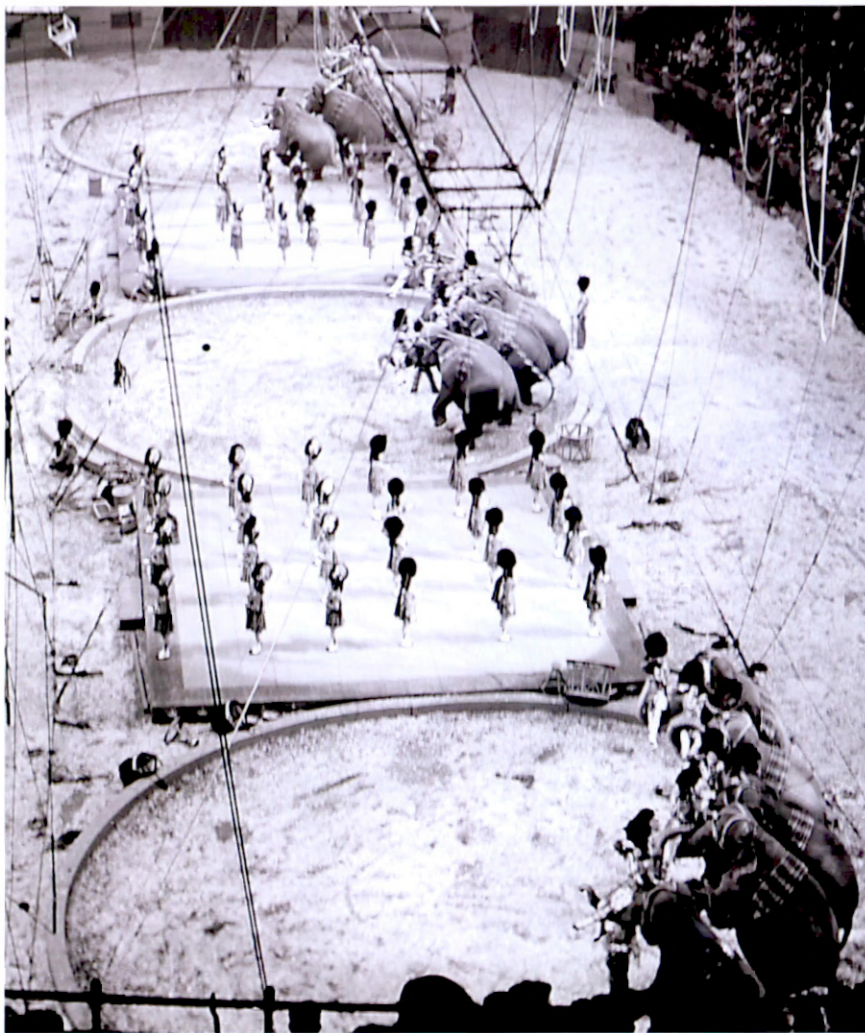
John Ringling North's "The Ballet of the Elephants" received top billing in 1942. "Fifty elephants and fifty beautiful girls in an original choreographic tour de force" read the publicity. The act was staged by John Murray Anderson, choreographed by the famous Russian dancer George Balanchine, scored by the internationally known avant-garde composer Igor Stravinsky, and its costumes were designed by Miles White. Elephants and showgirls alike performed in pink tutus with Modoc showcased as the prima ballerina. It was Connie Clausen's first year as a North "Starlet." She recalled the April 9 opening night elephant act in Madison Square Garden.

"Our garlands high above our heads, our tutus standing out in crisp net folds, the satin ribbons of our pink ballet slippers elegantly tied, we danced along the blue sawdust-covered track like dolls, miraculously brought to life by the blue spotlights that followed us wherever we moved. The dancing girls

dispersed to the stages, the elephant girls to the waiting elephants."⁴⁰

The 31 elephants in the production had ballet skirts strapped around their mid sections and satin bows attached to their headpieces. Balanchine's attractive 25-year-old wife, Vera Zorina, made a guest appearance in "The Ballet of the Elephants" which caused a considerable stir due to her renown as a ballerina and Hollywood actress. *Billboard* reported that "Zorina put over a synchronized terp⁴¹ with Modoc in the center ring that marks a high point in sawdust annals."⁴² The review went on to note, "In many respects this display might be termed the piece de resistance of the show...Modoc, who lunged heavy tonnage from side to side in tempo with the trim Zorina..."⁴³ Although Zorina only performed on opening night, New Yorkers liked what they saw. Business boomed throughout the engagement.

Out on the road, tragedy struck again. This time it was in Cleveland. The menagerie tent in 1942 was a six center pole, 120 foot round top with five 40 foot middle sections (120x320'). On the morning of August 4, the tent's canvas caught on fire and was consumed in less than 10 minutes.⁴⁴ McClain and other circus employees ran to the burning tent and were able to get most of the show's 45 elephants



Robert Ringling conceived "The Changing of the Guard" elephant production after he was elected president of the circus in 1943. Less than three months after this Madison Square Garden photograph was taken in 1944, the horrific Hartford fire would take its awful toll on humanity and the circus itself.

Circus World Museum

out within minutes. J. Y. "Doc" Henderson, who was working in his first year as the show's veterinarian,⁴⁵ immediately jumped into action with round-the-clock treatment of elephants and other animals in need of urgent care. Despite such valiant efforts, many animals died including four of the beautiful Ringling elephants. After missing the matinee performance, the night show played to a turn-away crowd.⁴⁶ The biggest applause was given to the elephants that appeared in "The Ballet of the Elephants," presented in the spirit of "the show must go on." Although several scenarios were advanced and investigated, there was no official determination regarding who set or what caused the fire.

Walter McClain's life was cut short when a section of

the train was being unloaded in Jacksonville, Florida on November 25, 1942. A wire story picked up by newspapers across the country reported that McClain had been accidentally killed when he attempted to apply the brakes of a loaded wagon as it was being lowered down the runs. He slipped off the side and "a wheel of the wagon rolled over him."⁴⁷ Oscar Cristiani and John Ringling North were watching the unloading. McClain was standing nearby tending a pair of elephants. Cristiani would later provide his eye-witness account that as the wagon was being lowered down the runs, the "hook rope" [more accurately, the snubbing rope] used to control the wagon's descent, broke. Cristiani said that McClain had attempted to hop on the runaway wagon to set its brakes as it crossed an intersection in front of the runs. In the process he slipped underneath the rolling wagon.⁴⁸

When the show's board of directors met in January 1943, John Ringling North could see that he would not be retained to run the circus after his five-year contract expired in April. Therefore, he resigned. This paved the way for Robert Ringling (Charles and Edith's son) to be elected president. Among his efforts to take the circus back to "the good old days," Robert Ringling conceived of a major new elephant act to follow "The Ballet of the Elephants."

The "Changing of the Guard" was brilliantly staged by John Murray Anderson. Eddie Allen put together the elephant routines. The production was choreographed by Radio City Music Hall's Lauretta Jefferson. The elephants were clad in Grenadier-like trappings. The showgirls marched with military precision in costuming designed to look like the British monarch's Coldstream Guard. By all accounts it was a spectacular elephant act, and it was so well received that it was repeated for four consecutive seasons. The costumes and elephant trappings were modified occasionally, some seasons featuring bearskin hats and plaid kilts. There were also changes in the elephant department leadership. Allen was replaced by Fred Schafer in 1944, and he by Richard Shipley the next year.

John Ringling North was back in the Ringling-Barnum management picture for the 1947 season.⁴⁹ In March he received an offer to buy five well trained elephants that had been in Sweden since the height of World War II. North agreed to purchase them providing their German trainer, Hugo Schmitt, came with them to the United States. The events leading up to North's acquisition of these elephants provide a fascinating story.

Hugo Schmitt (1904-1977) began his career working at the Hagenbeck Tierpark in Hamburg. Over time he advanced to become the zoo's head elephant keeper. He then became the principal elephant trainer for the Carl Hagenbeck Circus. In the 1930s he traveled to India on occasion to select elephants to be imported to Germany. In July 1943, during the unrelenting Allied bombing of Hamburg, the zoo where the elephants were being kept was destroyed.

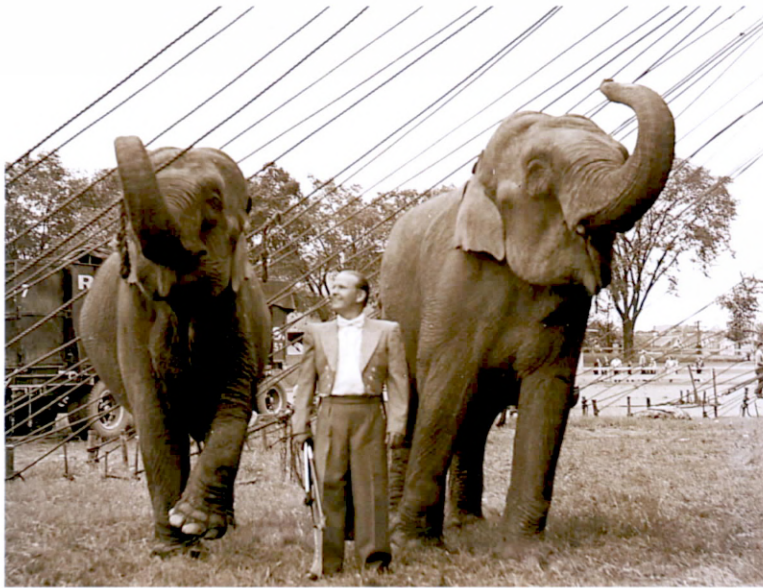
As the bombs began to fall in the general vicinity of the zoo, Schmitt took the elephants and sheltered them under a nearby bridge. Although about 400 of the zoo's animals were killed, the elephants were spared due to Schmitt's actions.

Aware that the elephants were still at great risk, the zoo sent Schmitt with his five best elephants to neutral Sweden for the duration of the war. They were based at Trolle Rhodin's Zoo Circus winter quarters in Malmo. After the war, the Swedish government decided to confiscate the elephants as "spoils of war" and planned to sell them to various buyers. Schmitt became so enraged that he released the elephants into the streets of Malmo on February 23, 1947.⁵⁰ After the police pleaded with him to round up the elephants, he reluctantly did so. Schmitt claimed the elephants loved each other and would die if separated. Apparently, officials



Hugo Schmitt (second from right with shirt sleeves rolled up) warms up elephants in the circus backyard during his first full season with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. This photo was taken on August 1, 1948 in Mankato, Minnesota.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections



Baptiste Schreiber brought his two elephants from Germany in 1950 and introduced his springboard routine to Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey audiences.

Circus World Museum

consented to try to sell them as a group.

Hugo Schmitt with his five elephants – Icky, Karnaudi, Mutu, Sabu, and Minijak – arrived in America on June 20, 1947. They joined Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in Detroit. Schmitt stayed on the show just long enough to select three elephants from the Ringling herd to be integrated with his five. These eight elephants were then transported to Sarasota where Schmitt developed a new center ring act for the 1948 season. The following year the performance lineup once again included the leaps over a group of elephants. This time it was the Ugo Troup. Schmitt left Ringling-Barnum after the 1949 season to pursue other contracts, but he would return in 1954.

During Hugo Schmitt's absence, Eugene "Arky" Scott (1905-1968) got the call to serve as Ringling's elephant boss. He had been in charge of the Cole Bros. Circus herd for a number of years. During his first season with

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Scott shared elephant billing with Baptiste Schreiber who was brought over from Germany with his two springboard elephants.⁵¹ In a fast-paced acrobatic routine, Schreiber was propelled by an elephant from a teeterboard to the back of another elephant. Schreiber worked alone and commanded the spotlight. A young Gunther Gebel-Williams had likely seen or heard about Schreiber's act when the future superstar was embarking on his circus career in Europe.

Two of the most celebrated elephant men in circus history linked up briefly during the summer of 1951 when at the age of 16, William "Buckles" Woodcock Jr. was hired as an animal handler by Arky Scott.⁵² Buckles was the son of elephant trainer William "Bill" Woodcock Sr. and Sarah "Babe" Orton whose grandfather, Hiram, started Orton's Circus in 1854. Thus Buckles was the fourth generation of his family to work on circuses. Bill Woodcock Sr. had presented elephants for Arky Scott on the Cole Bros. Circus where Buckles had labored as a candy butcher. Scott knew of Buckles from that time period and offered him a summer job working on his elephant crew.⁵³



In this Paramount Pictures photograph, Arky Scott instructs Minijak to place her foot over Gloria Grahame's face. Mary Jane Miller is styling on top of the elephant. Minijak was one of the five elephants Hugo Schmitt brought from Sweden in 1947. She was born in January 1932 at the zoo in Essen, Germany. Captive-born elephants were extremely rare at that point in time.

Paramount Pictures Corporation, Dominic Yodice collection

The young teenager accepted. As Buckles was expanding his knowledge of elephants with Scott, his father acquired a four-year-old elephant that he named Anna May. After a short stay on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Buckles departed to go back to school. However, he and Anna May would return in a big way 22 years later.

During the 1951 filming of Cecil B. DeMille's epic movie *The Greatest Show on Earth*,⁵⁴ the Ringling-Barnum elephants enjoyed a major part. Minijak, in particular, had a starring role in the film that was first released in January 1952. She was the center ring elephant instructed by Klaus (Lyle Bettger), to step forward and hold her foot over Angel's (Gloria Grahame) face as the jealous trainer threatened the independent minded showgirl. Minijak was also the elephant summoned by Holly (Betty Hutton) to lift part of a collapsed cage wagon off of the show's General Manager, Brad (Charlton Heston), during the aftermath of the train wreck. Many of the show's performing elephants were featured in "Popcorn & Lemonade," considered to be one of the great circus finales of the time. The performers and animals of "Popcorn & Lemonade" were choreographed to the wonderful song of the same name composed by Henry Sullivan and John Murray Anderson. How unfortunate that footage of this upbeat production number was eliminated from the film due to a dispute between Anderson and DeMille regarding royalty payments for the use of the song.⁵⁵

During the winter months following the 1951 tour, a special unit under the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey banner played in venues in the biggest cities in Cuba. Arky Scott presented some of the Ringling elephants on those dates. This venture to the island just south of the Florida Keys was repeated a few times with the last excursion there being in the mid-1950s.

During the mid-20th century, veteran elephant man, Louis Reed (1881-1960), imported to the United States a very large number of elephants that had been captured in India. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey acquired more

than 30 of these in the early 1950s. In the summer of 1952, Reed began the process of training seven new baby elephants⁵⁶ he had delivered to the Sarasota winter quarters. The training was only partially completed by the following spring.⁵⁷ However, Arky Scott wanted to place the act into service in 1953, and he did so. He instructed six babies in the center ring as full-grown elephants worked in the end rings. The babies were too young. As the season progressed, they increasingly balked and failed to respond to Scott's direction. When the show returned to winter quarters in the fall, Hugo Schmitt was re-hired to complete their training. Schmitt took over the presentation of the baby elephant act



Arky Scott rides horseback next to Karnaudi and two "punk" elephants leading the Ringling-Barnum herd across a steel girder bridge spanning the Kanawha River in Charleston, West Virginia on July 15, 1954.

Greg Parkinson collection

in 1954. Scott and Schmitt divided the elephant duties on the road while Robert "Smokey" Jones (1927-2002) and Louie Reed worked in Sarasota to train a large number of additional baby elephants to appear with the show the next year.

At the outset of the 1955 season, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey left Sarasota with 51 elephants. Smokey Jones noted that 31 of these were babies, many of them being "jungle babies" the prior summer.⁵⁸ Hollywood's Marilyn Monroe garnered national press in New York when she appeared in the "Holidays" spectacle riding an elephant on

the night of March 30. Wearing a scant pink and black costume, Monroe rode Karnandi, who had been sprayed pink for that one performance.

In July, a male African elephant named Louie (later renamed Diamond) was added to the herd while the show was in Detroit. This brought the count to 52, the largest number of elephants ever to tour with a circus.⁵⁹ Later that month two of the baby elephants were transferred from the herd to travel in advance of the show in a special truck promoting the forthcoming arrival in each new stand. This, of course, reduced the number with the show to 50. The elephant act was called "Mama's in the Park" – "a gigantic fantasy with

history without further interruption until relinquishing the Blue Unit herd to his assistant, Axel Gautier, at the end of the 1970-1971 tour. Schmitt's twenty years with *The Greatest Show on Earth* was the longest of any elephant superintendent since George Denman's time. Schmitt's tenure was also distinguished by having presented Diamond, the spectacular African bull, as one of his center ring charges. No other male African elephant in the United States ever performed a regular elephant act routine with "all of the evolutions accomplished by his Asiatic cousins."⁶³

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey sent a special unit to South America in 1961. This show opened in Rio

de Janeiro on February 15 with 14 show-owed elephants and one leased elephant.⁶⁴ During a highly successful 26-day run in Sao Paulo, Brazil, the elephants were clearly the most popular of all the acts judging from the audience response.⁶⁵ A seven week run in Buenos Aires closed on May 28. Throughout the tour, the elephants were presented in three rings by Frank Regan, Oscar Cristiani, and Al Kyle.

Two years later, Hugo Schmitt returned to Europe to present elephants on a Ringling-Barnum tour that proved to be financially unsuccessful. Eight elephants leased from Chipperfield's Circus in England were seen on European dates in 1963 and 1964. Thereafter, Schmitt returned to the United States and continued to oversee the elephants on the indoor show for several years.

Charismatic and athletic, a human who possessed an uncanny rapport with exotic wild animals, and a dynamic once-in-a-lifetime circus superstar extraordinaire – Gunther Gebel-Williams – was all this and more. In the forward to Gunther's 1991 autobiography with Toni Reinhold, Ringling's staff veterinarian, Richard I. Houck wrote, "He is a complex, high-energy person, and yet down-to-earth with an easy sense of humor and honest soul."⁶⁶ As a presenter of elephants and many other species on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Gunther became legendary.

Gunther Gebel (1934-2001) was not born into the circus world, but at the age of 13 he joined Circus Williams



Hugo Schmitt was a master elephant trainer. One of his elephants is seen walking up a ramp on her hind legs, c. 1968.

Circus World Museum

ponderous nursemaids airing infant behemoths in huge baby carriages..."⁶⁰ The largest number of elephants to appear in the performance that year was thought to be 48, with the number declining as the season progressed.⁶¹

Hugo Schmitt was not on the show in July 1956 when John Ringling North proclaimed that, "The tented circus as it now exists is, in my opinion, a thing of the past."⁶² Schmitt left the struggling Ringling show and joined Arthur Leonard's new circus for the 1956 season. That venture was short-lived, however, and the trainer returned to the Ringling organization in 1957. He continued to make his mark on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey elephant

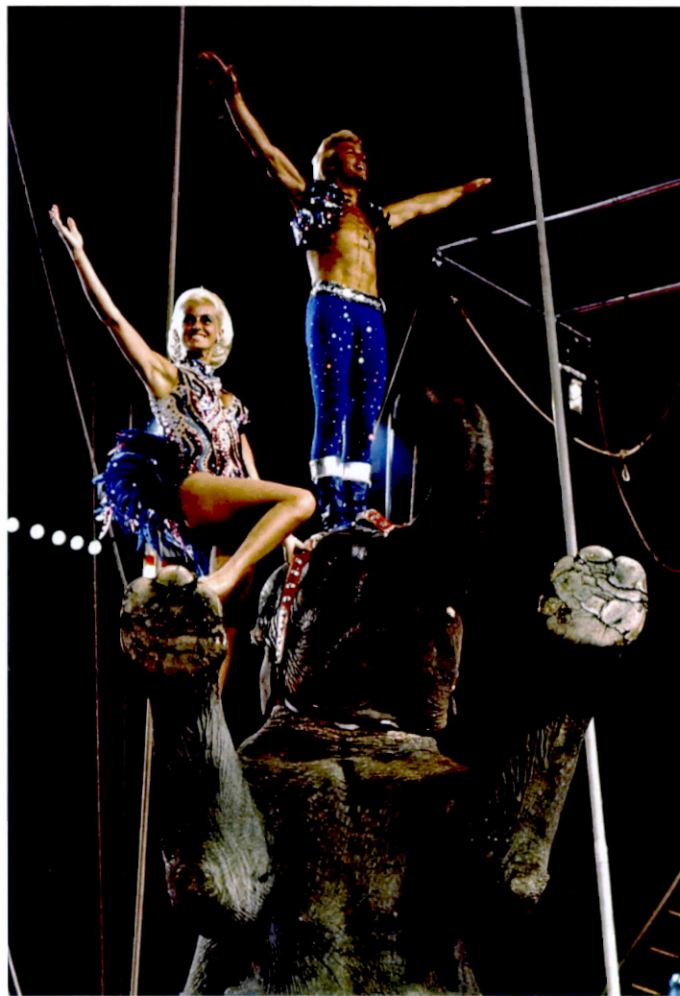
where his mother had hired on as a seamstress. She quit her employment after a few weeks. Gunther stayed with the German circus for two decades. He became an apprentice of sorts to Harry and Carola Williams, owners of the show. Harry died in January 1951 from injuries he had sustained while rehearsing a chariot act in London. Stricken with grief, Carola leased Circus Williams for the 1951 season and sent Gunther to work on her brother's show, Circus Franz Althoff.⁶⁷ It was there under the tutelage of Franz Althoff that Gunther began learning how to train elephants. Carola resumed operating Circus Williams the next year, and Gunther returned. Increasingly, Carola gave Gunther added responsibilities. In 1956, Gunther Gebel took over the Circus Williams elephants. The year was also noteworthy in that a young female African elephant named Congo⁶⁸ was purchased for Gunther.⁶⁹

In 1961, Gunther married Carola's daughter, Jeanette Williams. From that point on, he was introduced to audiences as Gunther Gebel-Williams. His array of acts had become varied and numerous – directing and performing with the show's 11 elephants, an elephant teeterboard act, dressage riding, and the presentation of the Lipizzaner liberty horses. By 1962, Gunther had trained Congo and a tiger named Bengali to work together in a steel arena. He presented that act for five years touring in Germany with Spanischer National Circus, a joint venture between Carola Williams and two individuals from Spain.

In November 1967, John Ringling North sold Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey to Irvin and Israel Feld, and Judge Roy Hofheinz. After the sale was finalized at the Coliseum in Rome, the Felds set about framing a second unit of The Greatest Show on Earth for a tour to begin in early 1969. They sought animals and headline acts for the venture, and there was no one better to fill the need than Gunther Gebel-Williams. It took a monumental cultivation effort by Trolle Rhodin and Irvin Feld, but Carola Williams, with Gunther's eventual support, was persuaded to sign a five-year renewable contract with the Felds.

Circus Williams ended operations in 1968. In November, Gunther, his new wife Sigrid,⁷⁰ her daughter Tina, Jeanette Williams, 12 Circus Williams elephants along with five more that Irvin Feld had purchased from the Chipperfields, nine tigers, nearly 40 horses, and other animals and personnel, departed Germany on a voyage to the United States of America.⁷¹ They arrived at a New Jersey port on November 15, 1968.

Gunther Gebel-Williams took America by storm. During his first two-year tour with the Ringling Bros. and

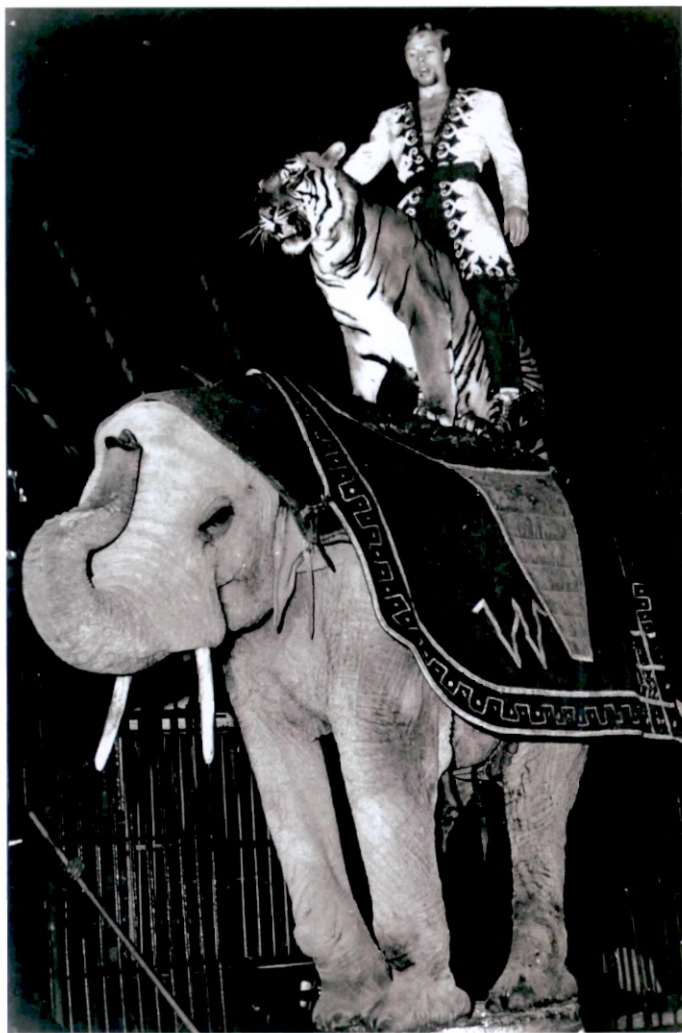


Gunther Gebel-Williams and his wife Sigrid during a Red Unit performance in 1973.

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Greg Parkinson collection

Barnum & Bailey Red Unit, he presented three acts that included elephants. The large act was commanded by Gunther as he literally ran back and forth among his elephants performing in all three rings. This was followed by a sensational teeterboard presentation with Gunther calling out to a favorite elephant, commanding Nellie to charge toward him and stomp on the high end of the board. With this propulsion, Gunther soared and somersaulted to the back of a second elephant, Tetchie, another of his favorites.⁷² Yet it was another presentation that immediately followed his tiger act⁷³ that caught the attention of many professional animal trainers.

Buckles Woodcock saw Gunther for the first time at the Milwaukee Arena in July 1970.⁷⁴ Recording his recollections of that occasion, Buckles wrote, "...the greatest circus animal act I ever saw – an Asian elephant, an African elephant and a large Bengal tiger, the elephants wore



This publicity photograph that was used in 1969 shows Gunther Gebel-Williams with his African elephant, Congo, and tiger, Bengali. The photo was taken in Germany prior to Gunther's arrival in the United States.

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Circus World Museum

protective padding, enabling the tiger to leap from back to back. The act concluded with the African elephant turning slowly on a tub with Gunther standing on his back astride the tiger.”⁷⁵

For the 1973-1974 Red Unit tour, as incredible as it seems, Gunther Gebel-Williams stood over his tiger, Bengali, on Congo's back while the elephant walked briskly around the hippodrome track. Gunther continued to make this uncaged presentation as part of the performance for a decade.

In the 105th “Bicentennial Edition” of *The Greatest Show on Earth*, Gunther introduced an amazing combination of three tigers, two horses, and African elephant Congo in the wire mesh arena. During the principal elephant

act, he worked three Asian elephants together with three white horses in the center ring. Gunther added Congo to this phenomenal elephant-equine act in 1979.

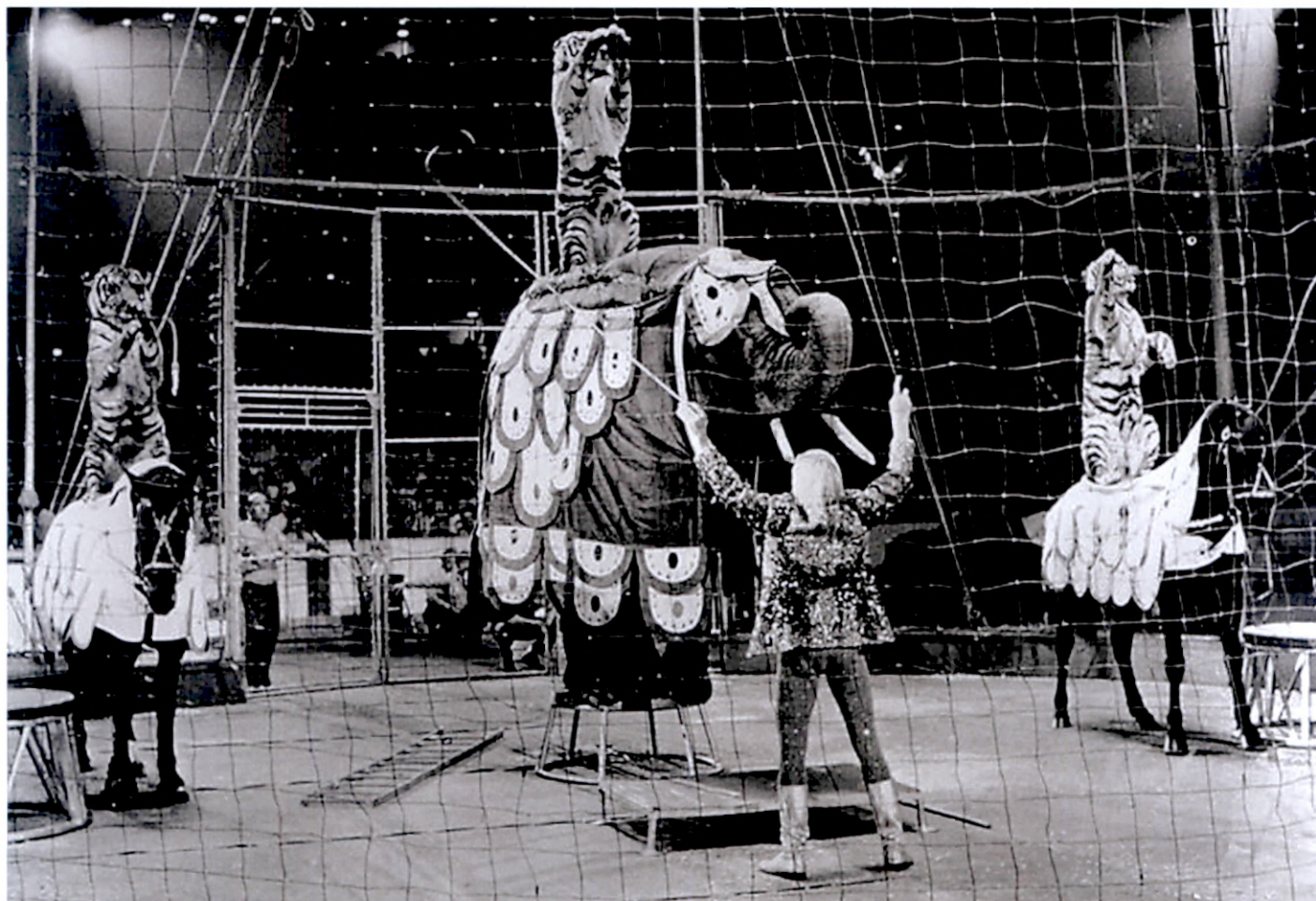
In the late 1970s, Gunther was severely injured when he stepped on a coupler and caught his foot between two railroad cars when the train started to move. The train stopped almost immediately, but Gunther's foot was virtually crushed. The show was to open the following day. Although he could not work the tigers or put any weight on his foot, he did direct the elephant act. Kenneth Feld told the story:

“He sat in one of these folding chairs right in front of ring two, on the other side of the track behind the footlights. The spotlights hit him, and he was in a tuxedo, and his foot was propped up, and he had a microphone, and he was yelling commands to the elephants.

“They came in, all 19 or 20 of them, and did the whole routine. And all the while they were sort of looking around to see where he was, knowing that his presence was there in his voice. He worked the elephant act for the next couple of weeks like that, and he was able to recover. His work ethic was just extraordinary.”⁷⁶

Axel Gautier (1942-1993) was a sixth-generation circus performer of Swedish ancestry. Through his sister's marriage to Trolle Rhodin, Gautier became acquainted with Hugo Schmitt. In 1958 Axel came to the United States and began working for Schmitt on Ringling-Barnum at the age of 15. In 1963 when Hugo went on the European tour, Axel presented the center ring act on Ringling-Barnum. He was 21 years old. He became the elephant superintendent of the Blue Unit eight years later. Gautier remained in charge of the show's 18 to 20 elephants through 1977. He and his family then exchanged places with the Woodcock family – the Gautiers moving to Circus World and the Woodcocks going on the road with the Blue Unit.

In October 1973, Buckles Woodcock had arrived at the Ringling winter quarters in Venice, Florida and taken over the elephants that were being trained by Hugo Schmitt for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus World theme park near Haines City. On February 20, 1974, the Circus World Showcase facility opened to the public. On that date, Buckles and his wife, Barbara – a leopard trainer and former member of the Flying Ray Dels – commenced performing with the new herd of 18 elephants. This group included seven young elephants purchased in Mexico, five acquired from Billy Smart in England, the Woodcocks' own Anna May, and several others. In early summer, Buck-

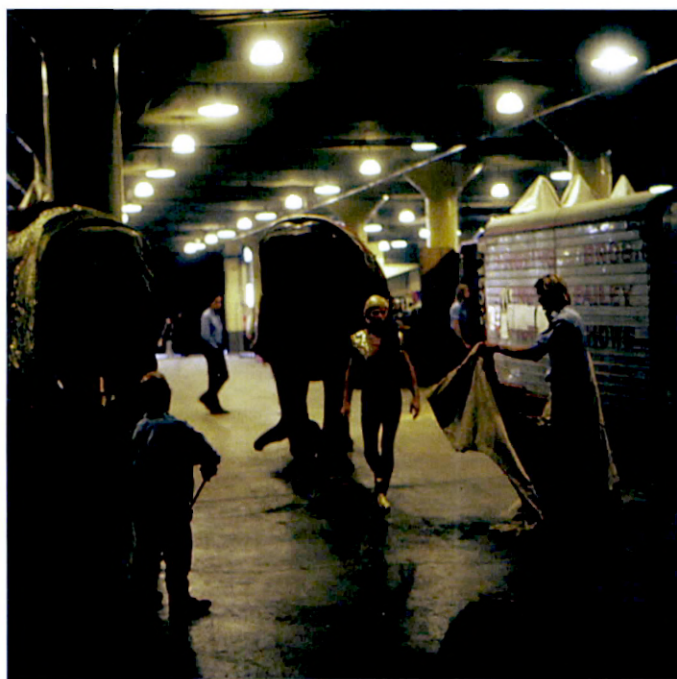


In 1975, Gunther Gebel-Williams introduced this amazing combination of three tigers, two horses, and his African elephant, Congo.
Mark Gebel collection

les added a 19th elephant to the Circus World herd, a male acquired from the Jacksonville Zoo.⁷⁷

The Woodcock family presented the elephants at Circus World for four years. Buckles and Barbara performed their stellar specialty act that included a leopard leaping from Anna May into Buckles arms. While they were at Circus World, Barbara's son, Ben Williams, took over this role. When the Circus World herd reached 20 elephants in 1976, Buckles Woodcock had 17 appearing in the performance. That same year, Gunther Gebel-Williams performed with 17 on the Red Unit, and Axel Gautier had 18 in three rings on the Blue Unit. These 52 elephants were the most ever to perform under the Ringling-Barnum title at a single point in time.

The Woodcocks made their debut on the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Blue Unit in 1978, presenting 22 elephants including the now legendary Anna May. The extended family included Buckles, Barbara, their young



Gunther Gebel-Williams backstage with his elephants after the mixed act with tigers in 1971.
Greg Parkinson collection



The Woodcocks moved from the Circus World theme park to the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Blue Unit in 1978. Left to right in this snapshot are Shannon Woodcock, Buckles, Barbara, Dalilah Woodcock, Ben William's stepson Shane, and Ben's first wife Karen.

Buckles Woodcock collection

children Shannon and Dalilah, Ben Williams and his wife, Karen, and her young son Shane.⁷⁸ Their presentation was an extraordinary amalgamation of fast-paced elephant action, dazzling showmanship, sparkling Don Foote costuming, and remarkable routines and long mounts. The Woodcock children added heart-warming and memorable moments to the elephant act.

Barbara and Ben – who was outfitted a la Tarzan – presented the center ring “elephant display that was a heady blend of elephants, leopards and sex appeal” as characterized by Ernest Albrecht.⁷⁹ Anna May carried Barbara about, holding her knee in her mouth. Ben walked up Anna May's back as the elephant rose into a hind-leg stand, reaching a standing position on her head. Anna May was so steady that Ben could hold his position for an extended period of time to receive the audience's applause. In another maneuver, Ben backed in front of Anna May's hind leg stand, ducking down and out between her back legs as she tilted forward into a headstand. Although Ben was not with the show during the second year of the tour, the rest of the Woodcock family continued to wow audiences for the duration of the Blue Unit tour, the 108th of *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

In 1980, Axel Gautier returned to the Blue Unit with his wife, Donna, and two sons, Kevin and Michael. The Gautier family presented elephants on Ringling Bros. and Barnum

& Bailey through the end of 1989. Kevin and Michael presented baby elephants during that period. Axel and Donna brought back the trick made famous through the 1952 movie, *The Greatest Show on Earth*. This time it was Siam, one of the babies that had been added to the show's herd in 1955, that suspended her foot just inches above Donna's face as she lay in the ring. One of the most impressive parts of the act was when Kevin stood on top of an elephant's head as it walked across the ring on its hind legs.

The Richter family from Hungary also appeared on the Ringling-Barnum Blue Unit with their elephants in 1980. They had been brought over in early 1979 by producers Irvin and Kenneth Feld to perform on the Felds' new one ring Festival International du Cirque de Monte Carlo Spectacular – a sensational indoor presentation of European acts. That circus failed to attract a significant audience. When the Felds stopped the tour mid-year, the Richter's



Barbara Woodcock and Ben Williams ride Anna May in the 1978 Blue Unit spec titled Neptune's Circus. The trio electrified Ringling-Barnum audiences with their center ring presentation. Buckles Woodcock is walking beside his elephant, Anna May.

Buckles Woodcock collection.

were held over to perform on the Blue Unit for the first year of the 110th edition. Some of the Richter's turns were truly remarkable. They accomplished a teeterboard somersault to a three-high human column standing on the back of one of their elephants. One member of the family also did a one-arm handstand on an elephant's head while that elephant stood on one front foot.⁸⁰ The Richters were not on the show for the second year of the tour.

Sigrid Gebel discontinued appearing with Gunther in the large Red Unit elephant act after 1980. However, Irvin and Kenneth Feld continued to feature members of the Gebel-Williams and Gautier families in the elephant productions throughout the 1980s. Mark Oliver Gebel and his sister, Tina, began appearing in the elephant act with their father in 1981. Michael and Kevin Gautier presented baby elephants on several Blue Unit tours beginning in 1982. Sigrid continued to present stunning liberty horse acts until 1988. Both families were mainstays of the Feld productions through the end of the decade.

The greatest promotion of an elephant since Jumbo, was undoubtedly Kenneth Feld's "King Tusk." This huge male was one of a group of elephants imported from India in 1947 by Louis Reed. As a youngster the elephant was given the name Tommy. He appeared on the Dailey Bros. Circus and then on several mid-sized truck circuses. Tony Diano purchased Tommy in late 1953. Diano leased his elephants to various circuses and carnivals for many years. Over time, Tommy developed a massive pair of tusks. He was also distinguished among large male elephants in that he was one of the only such males that was usually manageable. Feld acquired Tommy in 1986 and gave him a new identity.

King Tusk became the center piece of a spectacle of royal proportions. Arthur Boccia designed the costumes and trappings of gold, silver, lavender, with touches of midnight and sky blue. Disney on Ice veteran, Larry Billman, made his circus staging debut. Reid Carlson answered the call for scenic design and special effects. Producer Kenneth Feld claimed King Tusk was "the largest living land mammal walking the face of the Earth today."⁸¹ "The maximum, mighty mastodonic marvel!" wrote circus publicist, Jack Ryan. With his gold tusk extensions, elevated staging, and profuse trappings, King Tusk certainly looked the part during the 1987-1988 Red Unit tour.

Ringling-Barnum embarked on another international venture at the end of the 1980s. Kenneth Feld's third unit

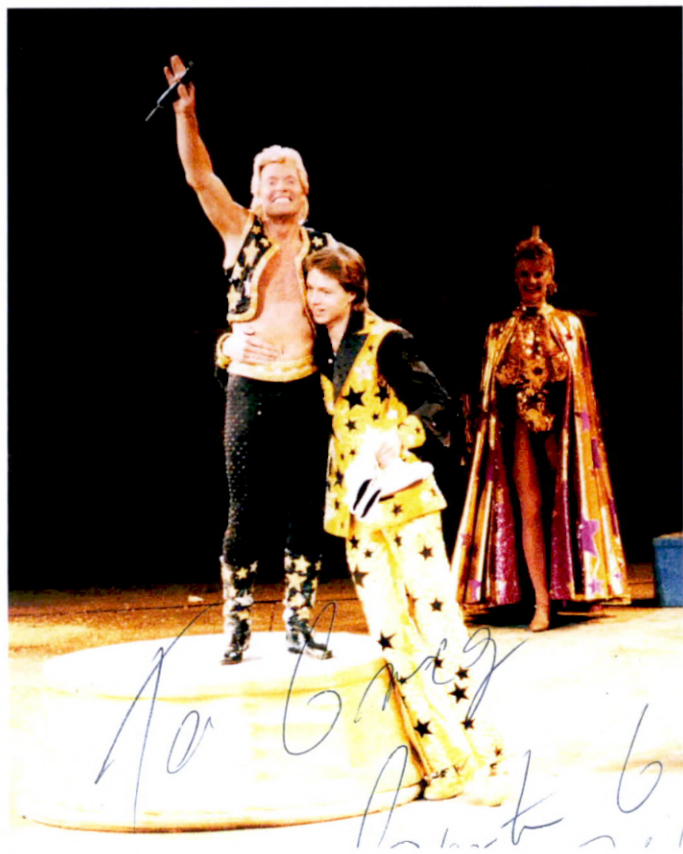
played in Japan with Bobby Moore's elephants in 1988. The next year the Japanese unit featured King Tusk under the direction of Gary Thomas and a large act of 16 elephants presented by Roy Wells and his staff. Thirteen of these elephants were contracted from John Cuneo and three were show-owned.

Gunther Gebel-Williams began his "Farewell Tour" in January 1989. Since he first burst on the scene with the debut of Irvin Feld's second unit, Gunther had received nearly every award and accolade imaginable for a circus performer. He had appeared multiple times on the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, and starred in several prime-time network television specials. Following a career of 11,696 performances throughout the United States, the last show of the Farewell Tour took place in Pittsburgh on November 18, 1990. Both of the writers of this article were among the invited guests that night. Simply put, it was a never-to-be-forgotten occasion. When Gunther spoke from atop an elephant tub and handed his white boots to his son, Mark, we all had a lump in our throat.



Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Souvenir Program & Magazine cover, 117th edition, 1987.

Julie Parkinson collection



Gunther Gebel-Williams acknowledged the audience in Pittsburgh on the occasion of the final performance of his Farewell Tour. He had just handed down his white boots to his son, Mark Gebel.

Greg Parkinson collection

Gunther never actually retired. He served as Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Vice President of Animal Care for several years after he stepped out of the ring. He also returned to perform on a few special occasions including the 1994 filming in several cities for another televised special, CBS's *The Return of Gunther Gebel-Williams*. His very last performance was in Grand Rapids, Michigan on September 27, 1998 when he stood in for Mark Gebel so that Mark could be present for the birth of his own son. Gunther Gebel-Williams died of cancer at his home in Venice, Florida on July 19, 2001. A few days later, Buckles Woodcock wrote, "I sincerely feel that we will never see his likes again."⁸²

As soon as Gunther's final two-year tour commenced, Kenneth Feld and Ringling talent scout Tim Holst (who would become Vice President of Production and Talent) set about searching for another headline animal trainer to replace the Gautier family as a feature on the Blue Unit. A handsome 29-year-old Flavio Togni along with the extended Togni family from Italy filled the need, and they

were recruited for the 120th edition tour. Togni family members presented the Blue Unit's primary elephant act, as well as horses and a rhinoceros. One of Flavio's beautiful center ring presentations was a mixed act with four Asian



Axel Gautier came to the United States in 1958 and began working for Hugo Schmitt at the age of 15. He became superintendent of the Blue Unit elephants in 1971. Axel is seen presenting Ringling-Barnum elephants in 1992.

Paul Gutheil photograph

elephants and four Arabian palomino horses. His showmanship was truly superb, and he exhibited a tremendous connection with his elephants and horses.

After the Togni family returned to their own circus in Italy, Axel Gautier came back once again to lead the Blue Unit elephant acts. Axel was superintendent of the herd during the 1992-1993 tour. King Tusk also returned to the show. The Piverals and Catherine Bretz presented their hand-balancing on a platform mounted on the back of the huge elephant. On May 5, 1993, Axel Gautier died as a result of a terrible incident that occurred when he was visit-



Mark Gebel grew up around the Red Unit elephants, performed in the show for a decade with his famous father, and continued presenting the elephants for 14 years after Gunther retired.

Richard "Doc" Houck collection

ing the elephant retirement farm near Williston, Florida.

Unlike his famous father, Mark Oliver Gebel was born into the circus world. This occurred in 1970 while the circus was playing Houston. He literally grew up around the Red Unit elephants. In January 1981, Mark made his debut in his father's elephant act when the show opened in Venice. He was featured riding Dicky, the large male giraffe, and working with four African elephants in "Jungle Jamboree." After Gunther retired in 1990, Mark inherited the Red Unit's 21 elephants. He performed the teeterboard act with Nellie and Tetchie, having learned the commands and required acrobatic skills from his father. For the next 14 years Mark was the principal star of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Red Unit elephant acts.

The animal walks from the train to each city's arena began to be publicized after Irvin Feld created the second traveling unit in 1969. Such animal processions staged each spring in New York City received special attention. In March 1995, the lights on the Empire State Building were gleaming brightly across the East River when the 18 elephants of the Red Unit were unloaded in Queens. At midnight Mark Gebel gave the order, and the herd began to walk in trunk-to-tail fashion toward the entrance to the Midtown Tunnel.

Joining the elephants were the show's horses, zebras, camels, and llamas. The procession passed through the tunnel under the river. When the elephants emerged on the Manhattan side, Mayor Rudy Giuliani and his son, Andrew, were there to greet them. As the animals proceeded crosstown toward Madison Square Garden, there was a line of people on every street. "There were loud cheers for the animals. People started marching along on the sidewalks, shouting and yelling."⁸³ The circus and its elephants were back!

Mark Gebel's final performance on the road with the Red Unit elephants was on November 21, 2004. He had performed with the elephants for a total of 24 years.

A dozen years before Mark Gebel's last performance, elephants owned by Kenneth Feld were successfully bred at the elephant farm near Williston,

Florida. A female baby was born on December 30, 1992. She was named after Kenneth and Bonnie Feld's youngest daughter, Juliette. A male elephant was born eleven days later on January 10, 1993. He was given the name Romeo. These two elephants would become "The babies all America wants to see" as they were featured on the 1994-1995 Blue Unit. Romeo and Juliette were trained and initially presented by Patricia Zerbini and her fiancé – elephant superintendent, Ted Svertesky. However, in the early morning of January 13, 1994 Ted tragically lost his life in the derailment of the Blue Unit train. After Svertesky's death, Buckles Woodcock was called upon to immediately take over the Blue Unit herd. There were 17 elephants on the show at that time, 14 of which were show-owned.

Patricia Zerbini persevered and continued to present Romeo and Juliette, the centerpiece of a rollicking pink and baby-blue spec with a highly memorable original musical score. Kenneth Feld brought Graham Thomas Chipperfield from England to add to the show's array of headline acts. Chipperfield presented his three-elephant teeterboard act, as well as his large group of male lions. King Tusk made a cameo appearance with trainer, Jimmy Silverlake. The main elephant act was presented in three rings by Buckles Woodcock, Patricia Zerbini, and Tom Haffner. Buckles had



Graham Thomas Chipperfield walks with Romeo, and Patricia Zerbini accompanies Juliette in 1994. Longtime Ringling elephant man, Sonny Ridley, is seen at the far right. Buckles Woodcock observes the scene at the far left.

Richard "Doc" Houck collection

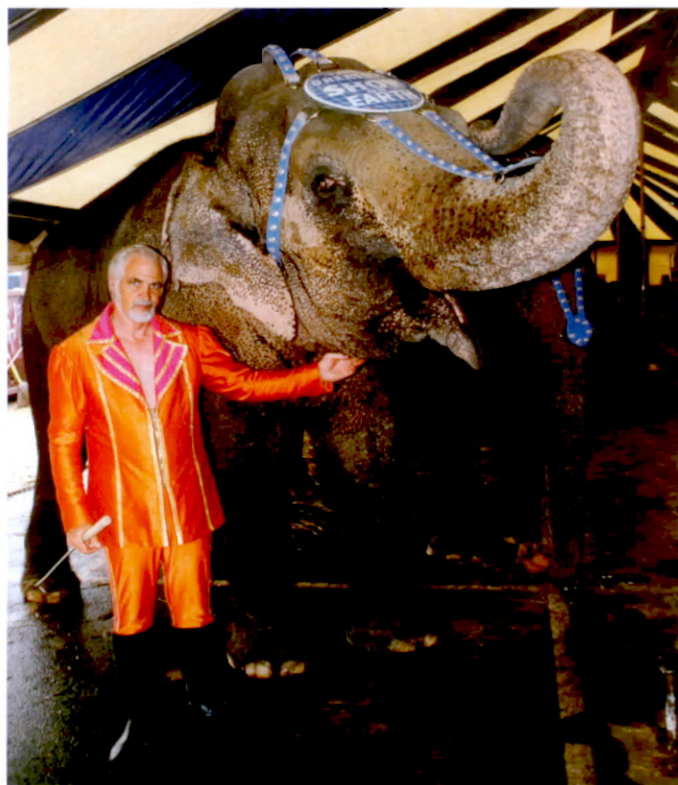
been contracted for only one year. Daniel Raffo was hired to work with Zerbini and Haffner during the second year of the tour.

Although the idea for an elephant conservation center can be traced back to the early 1980s, it was not constructed until 1995. Roman Schmitt, son of the great Ringling-Barnum elephant trainer, Hugo Schmitt, helped begin the project to develop a center dedicated to the conservation and breeding of Asian elephants. The state-of-the-art facility was designed by Dr. Richard "Doc" Houck, the then chief veterinarian for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. The Center for Elephant Conservation was constructed on 200 acres of Florida wetlands at a reported cost of \$5 million. In the summer of 1996, elephants began to take up residence in the tropical oasis. As of the beginning of 2017, the CEC reported that there had been 26 Asian elephant births at the facility since its opening. In addition to its breeding program, the CEC has had a long commitment to research concerning the Asian elephant and also to the well-being of the shows' retired elephants.

The 1996-1997 Blue Unit tour again featured Graham Thomas Chipperfield, King Tusk, and three rings of performing elephants. When the tour began, Chipperfield

worked the center ring act, Daniel Raffo was in Ring 1, and David Polk worked the elephants in Ring 3. Chipperfield's teeterboard act with the elephants he brought from England was also held over.

The Three Ring Adventure was introduced in the mid-1990s. This pre-show experience for circus audience members would be continued every year thereafter. One or more of the elephants was always part of this up close and personal encounter on the arena floor. Among other activities, elephants created paintings with their trunks for a few lucky individuals, and children were afforded the opportunity to observe the grand pachyderms from only a few feet away – just as they had done in the menageries of days gone by.



Buckles Woodcock was called back as superintendent of the Blue Unit's elephants in 1994. He posed for photographer Paul Gutheil in Philadelphia along with Siam, one of the babies delivered to Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey during the winter of 1953-1954.

Paul Gutheil photograph



Two baby elephants become acquainted with each other at the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Center for Elephant Conservation.

Richard "Doc" Houck collection

In 1998, Daniel Raffo moved to the Blue Unit's center ring. Alex Vargas and Patrick Harned worked the elephants in the end rings. Two baby elephants, Benjamin and Shirley, made their debut that year. The next year, over on the Red Unit, Mark Gebel was joined by Catherine Hanneford, and Roy Wells – the three jointly presenting the elephant act.

When the new Blue Unit show embarked in 2000, Sara Houcke was featured as "the tiger whisperer." She and Troy Metzler worked the elephants on that two-year tour. Metzler was the elephant superintendent, a position he held or shared with David Polk through 2009.

During Irvin Feld's tenure producing Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, the number of elephants on each traveling unit remained fairly constant between 17 and 21. The herds stayed in this range for nearly three decades. By 2000, the Blue Unit had dropped to 15 elephants, and by 2007 the Red Unit had only 10.

Due to various factors including ever-increasing costs, the count of elephants on each show continued to decline over the next several years. Nevertheless, the awe-inspiring animals were featured prominently in each new edition.

Sacha Houcke was granted equal responsibilities with Mark Gebel for the Red Unit elephant herd in 2001. For the tour that began that year, 20-year-old Larry Carden brought his male Asian elephant, Bo, to the show to appear with comic star performer, Bello Nock. "Bello and Bo" were a big hit with the public throughout that tour.

In 2004, Feld Entertainment established a new third unit to play venues in additional cities across the United States. Initially, this truck show was called Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey "Hometown Edition." Two baby elephants born at the Center for Elephant Conservation – Doc and Gunther – were presented by Patrick Harned during the show's first year. This circus soon became known as the Gold Unit. In 2005, Patty Zerbini was on the Gold show and performed with elephants owned by her father, Tarzan Zerbini.

At the outset of the 2005 season, Patrick Harned presented the babies, Doc and Gunther, on the new Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Red Unit. Sacha Houcke took over as superintendent when, after some challenges with the two male elephants, Harned took them back to the CEC in Florida. Houcke presented an elephant-equine combination that was similar to those presented by Gunther Gebel-Williams and Flavio Togni many years prior. Houcke's



Sacha Houcke watches closely as veteran Red Unit elephant, Asia, cautiously steps over six dancers in 2005.

Paul Gutheil photograph

act was a classy display of elephants and Norwegian Fjord horses. Another highlight of each Red Unit performance that year occurred when Houcke instructed Asia to step over six female dancers, each lying about three feet apart in the ring.

The next year, the elephant named Gunther returned to the Gold Unit ring along with another young elephant from the CEC, Angelica. The two were presented by Billy Morris and Libby Garcia.

In 2007, Joe Frisco, Jr. was placed in charge of the Red Unit's 10 elephants. The 2008-2009 Blue Unit's 10 elephants completed a long mount on the back track during the finale of the "Over the Top" production. That was the last time that either unit carried as many as 10 elephants.

Patty Zerbini returned to the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Gold show in 2007 and 2008. In 2009, the Gold Unit played at Coney Island. Three elephants owned by George Carden were presented there by Ramon Esqueada. This one ring show thereafter ventured to Europe, but no elephants from the United States made the journey.

The following year "Coney Island" was the theme of the Gold Unit. That production included Esqueada presenting elephants leased from Carson & Barnes Circus. Catherine and Brett Carden presented their elephants on the Gold Unit from 2011 through 2014. Alex Petrov directed the elephants on Feld Entertainment's third unit in 2015.

The leadership of the Red and Blue Unit elephants became somewhat challenging to follow beginning in 2009. Alex Vargas and Billy Morris shared responsibility for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Red Unit elephants during the 2009-2010 tour. Joe Frisco, Jr. moved to the Blue Unit in 2010. Brian Cristiani French was contracted to take over the Red Unit herd in 2011. He was joined by Tabayara "Taba" Maluenda who presented tigers, horses, and assisted with the elephants. Then in 2012, Maluenda moved over to the new Blue Unit with his acts and helped Joe Frisco, Jr. with the elephant presentation. Brian Cristiani French remained in charge of the Red Unit herd through 2014. Then Ryan Henning assumed the top responsibility for presenting that show's elephants.



The last time any Ringling-Barnum unit carried 10 or more elephants was during the 2008-2009 tour. That Blue Unit herd completed a long mount in the "Over the Top" finale.

Paul Gutheil photograph

Ryan Henning had first joined the Ringling elephant department in July of 2004. He stayed for 12 years and became the main animal care spokesperson for the circus. He was the primary presenter of the Red Unit's elephants on "Circus Extreme" – the 145th edition of *The Greatest Show on Earth* and the last edition with performing elephants.

Since the late 19th century, various organizations and groups challenged circuses regarding their inclusion of certain types of animal acts. In 1880, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) tried to stop P. T. Barnum's presentation of Salamander – "The Wonderful Fire Horse," a feature that year of *The Greatest Show on Earth*. In recent decades, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey elephants became a target of organized groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) as well as other so-called animal rights groups. These activists gained support and funding, often through misrepresentation of the facts and outright deceit concerning the care and treatment of Ringling elephants. In 2014, Feld Entertainment won a 14-year legal battle with various animal rights groups. The company was awarded \$15.75 million in settlements with the Humane Society and other organizations. The Court ruled that "evidence" of Ringling mistreatment of its elephants had been fabricated and that a witness for the plaintive had been paid to bolster the case presented against the circus with untrue testimony. All told, Feld Entertainment won lawsuits filed against the company with combined total settlements exceeding \$25 million.

Nevertheless, protests continued and even intensified. Increasingly, state and local governments enacted legislation and municipal codes that effectively banned the inclusion of elephants in performances in their jurisdictions. The ongoing expenses associated with fighting "City Hall," the growing difficulty in routing the shows in certain regions of the coun-

try, and the evolving perspectives of the public regarding performing elephants – led to the 2015 decision to retire all of the Ringling-Barnum elephants.

The Felds' decision was undoubtedly an extremely difficult one to make. The resources their company annually invested in elephants were enormous. Three generations of the Feld family were dedicated to the care and presentation of elephants, as well as the preservation of the Asian species. That nearly 50-year commitment was truly monumental.

On May 1, 2016, a reporter for *The Washington Post* attended and described the opening of the second-to-the-last performance in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

"When the portal curtains opened and the ringmaster began to belt 'The Star-Spangled Banner,' they [Asia and Ryan Henning] walked out into the spotlight for the show's made-in-America opening moment: a man from Wisconsin striding briskly alongside an elephant from Asia ridden by a woman from



"The Star-Spangled Banner" was sung by the ringmaster to begin the show, as Asia circled the track with Ryan Henning during the performances of the 145th edition of *The Greatest Show on Earth* – the last to include elephants.

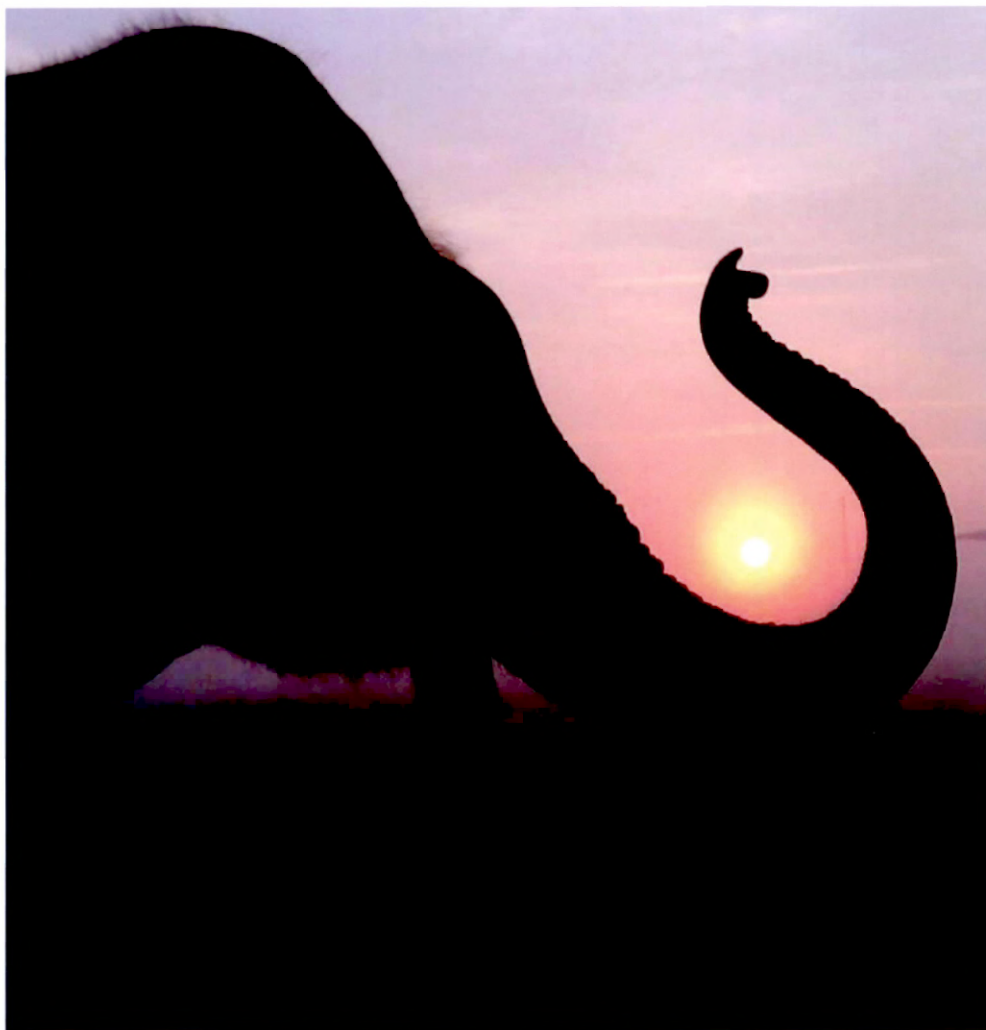
Ryan Henning collection

Mongolia carrying a large flowing American flag. The routine was simple. Once around the arena, stop, raise trunk and right foot in a kind of salute to the land of the free and the home of the brave. It's hard to say if Asia was enjoying herself, but the audience was cheering wildly.⁷⁸⁴

The *Washington Post* reporter had studied the Ringling elephants for several weeks. She continued her article, observing – “When elephants’ basic needs are met, when they grow excited in anticipation of something good and interact peacefully with those around them, that looks like something that could be called happiness. Watching Asia and her traveling sisters week after week, that was what I saw.”⁷⁸⁵

And so the era of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey performing elephants ended. The 11 elephants that were retired in May 2016 were transported to the Center for Elephant Conservation in Florida. At the end of the year, 42 elephants were residing at the CEC – the largest population of Asian elephants anywhere in the Western Hemisphere. However most of these elephants had been sold to the White Oak Conservation Center located north of Jacksonville, Florida. Only six of the oldest elephants continued to be owned by Feld Entertainment.

On the night of January 14, 2017 came the announcement that both units of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey would close in May. The Greatest Show on Earth would cease operations as a traveling circus. A statement from Kenneth Feld pointed out that “Ringling Bros. ticket sales have been declining, but following the transition of the elephants off the road, we saw an even more dramatic drop.”⁷⁸⁶ The *Billboard* review of the very first performance



Suzan was one of about 20 baby elephants brought to the United States by Louis Reed in the winter of 1953-1954. She was retired to the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Center for Elephant Conservation after nearly a half century trouping with The Greatest Show on Earth. Suzan was about 57 years old at the time this photo was taken c. 2008.

Randy Peterson photograph

of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey back in 1919 had prophesized that “The circus will live forever, as long as they have elephants.” For one of the most recognized brands in American history, the removal of elephants from its traveling shows accelerated the final curtain.

Memories live on. Marcella, Yasso, Old Nell, Modoc, Minijak, Congo, Nellie, Anna May, King Tusk, Asia, and so many more won the hearts of millions across the country. They were truly marvelous creatures that were greatly celebrated – when elephants came to town. **BW**

Greg Parkinson joined the full-time staff of Circus World Museum in 1978, working as Assistant Library & Research Center Director and performing as ringmaster in the big top. He served as Circus World Museum's Executive Director

from 1985 through 2001. During those 17 years he directed the circus performances and led the staff that staged the annual Great Circus Parade in Milwaukee. He served on the juries of the international circus festivals in Genoa, Italy in 1994 and Monte-Carlo in 1997. In 2004 he went to work for the Wisconsin Historical Society where he became Deputy Director. He retired in 2016.

Julie Parkinson performed for 15 years, beginning her career at Circus World Museum in 1987. From 1994 through 1997 she toured with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's Blue Unit as a member of the performing cast. She served as Company Manager of the Big Apple Circus 2003-2006. She held lead positions for Cirque du Soleil productions in Las Vegas from 2006 through 2013 including *The Beatles LOVE*, *VIVA Elvis*, and *Zarkana*. While living in Sarasota, she freelanced as a scenic and fine art painter on projects for Cirque's OVO and Toruk. Julie is currently the Assistant to the Dean of the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

Acknowledgments

Many people provided information and illustrations for this article. Deep appreciation is extended to Pete Shrake, Archivist, Circus World Museum; Randy Peterson, former Operations Manager, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Center for Elephant Conservation; Melissa Peterson, former Veterinarian Administrative Assistant, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey; Paul Gutheil; Dr. Richard Houck, former Staff Veterinarian for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey; Dominic Yodice; Fred Dahlinger, Curator of Circus History, Circus Museum, The Ringling; Ryan Henning; Buckles Woodcock; Shannon Woodcock; Chris Berry; Maureen Brunsdale, Special Collections & Rare Books Librarian, Milner Library, Illinois State University; Mark Schmitt, Specialist, Special Collections, Milner Library, Illinois State University; and Jennifer Lemmer Posey, Associate Curator of the Circus Museum, The Ringling. The incredible circus elephant documentation created long ago by Chang Reynolds and William H. Woodcock Sr. is also hereby acknowledged.

Finally, we impart a Jumbo-sized thank you to the hundreds of men and women who worked with and cared for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey elephants over the years – veteran trainers; headline performers and all who worked in the ring; costumed elephant riders and dancers; handlers and others who spread hay, watered, and shoveled

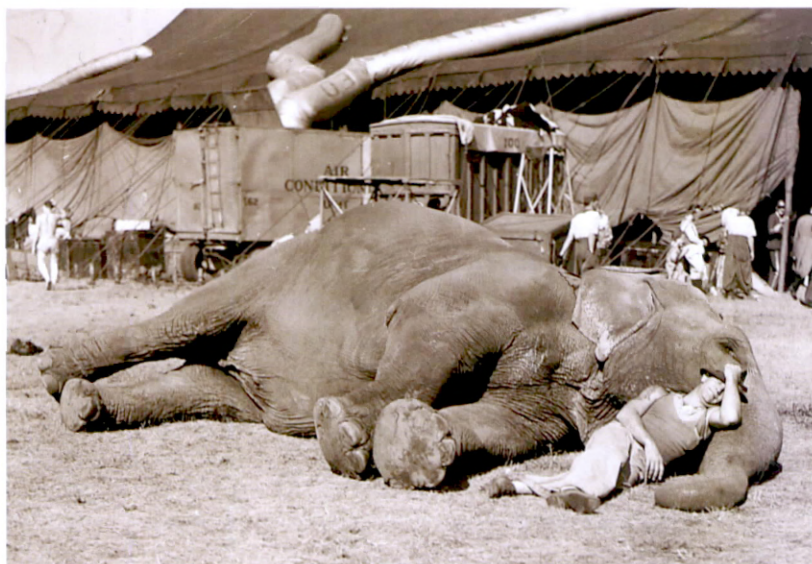
day and night; those who guided the elephants during the set up and tear down; veterinarians and veterinary technicians; the owners and producers; and the founders who first introduced elephants to The Greatest Show on Earth.

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8. William Judkind Hewitt, *The Billboard*, April 1, 1922, p. 5.
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28. Ibid. p. 26.
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54. The Paramount Pictures film was nominated for five Academy Awards and won the Oscar for Best Picture of the Year.
55. David Lewis Hammarstrom, *Big Top Boss* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 169.
56. The seven baby elephants initially trained by Louis Reed were Tex, Padmah, Tara, Yamina, Rani, Seta and Rajee.
57. William "Buckles" Woodcock comment regarding Louis Reed, *Buckles Blog*, August 8, 2008.
58. Bill Ballantine, *Wild Tigers & Tame Fleas* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1958), p. 278.
59. Richard J. Reynolds, III, "Hold Your Horses – Here Come the Elephants", p. 17 – paper presented at the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums Southern Regional Workshop in Knoxville, Tennessee, April 1-3, 1979.
60. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Magazine & Program, 1955.
61. Robert "Smokey" Jones, notes from discussion with Greg Parkinson, February 1993.

62. John Ringling North's hand-written statement released to the press by Rudy Bundy, July 16, 1956, Robert "Bob" Horne collection.
63. Chang Reynolds, "The Ringling Elephants 1888-1967", *Bandwagon*, September-October 1968, p. 11.
64. Douglas Lyon, "Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus International Ltd., *Bandwagon*, March-April 1964, p. 24.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
66. Gunther Gebel-Williams with Toni Reinhold, *Untamed* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), p. 12.
67. Dominique Jando, "Gunther Gebel-Williams," *Circopedia* website.
68. Congo was a female African bush elephant captured in 1948. She was thought to have been born in 1946. Although some sources spell her name as "Kongo," there are two primary sources that suggest that "Congo" is the correct spelling. Foremost is Gunther's 1991 autobiography that consistently spelled her name this way. Moreover, editions of the North American Regional Studbook for the African Elephant and leading on-line elephant data-bases also spell the elephant's name as Congo.
69. Gunther Gebel-Williams with Toni Reinhold, *Untamed* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), p. 333.
70. Gunther Gebel-Williams and Jeanette Williams divorced in 1967. Gunther and Sigrid Neubauer were married on April 10, 1968.
71. Gunther Gebel-Williams with Toni Reinhold, *Untamed* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), p. 197.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
73. Gunther Gebel-Williams purchased eight tigers in 1968 after the contract was signed to perform on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. He had performed on Circus Williams and Spanischer National Circus with only one tiger, Bengali.
74. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's Red Unit played Milwaukee twice in 1970. The first date was July 4-5 in association with Circus World Museum's production of the Schlitz Circus Parade and the Old Milwaukee Days festival. The show appeared again in Milwaukee October 13-18.
75. William "Buckles" Woodcock, written recollections of Gunther Gebel-Williams, July 22, 2001, Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center, Circus World Museum.
76. Kenneth Feld undated interview with excerpts published in Ernest Albrecht's "Here was a Caesar. When Comes Such Another?" *Spectacle*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2001.
77. William "Buckles" Woodcock letter to Don Marks, July 18, 1974, Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center, Circus World Museum.
78. Shannon and Dalilah represented the 5th generation of the Woodcock/Orton family to perform on American circuses.
79. Ernest Albrecht, *From Barnum & Bailey to Feld*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), p. 197.
80. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Souvenir Program & Magazine, 110th edition, 1980.
81. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Souvenir Program & Magazine, 117th edition, 1987.
82. William "Buckles" Woodcock, written recollections of Gunther Gebel-Williams, July 22, 2001, Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center, Circus World Museum.
83. Michael T. Kaufman, *The New York Times*, March 24, 1995.
84. Kristin Henderson, "Leaving the Show," *The Washington Post Magazine*, October 30, 2016, p. 25.
85. *Ibid.*, p. 25
86. Kenneth Feld, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey press release, January 14, 2017.



Photographer Harry Atwell captured this unusual sight in the Ringling-Barnum backyard in 1941.

Circus World Museum

Where elephants used to roar:

An historical sketch of Ringlingville's Elephant House



Several wagons are parked in front of the elephant house in this circa 1902-1904 photograph.

by Peter Shrake

All images courtesy of Circus World Museum

It was a wintery Tuesday night in late November when the Ringling trains pulled into the Baraboo rail yards at the end of the 1906 performance season. The blizzard like conditions didn't stop the unloading of the trains, but it did give the elephants pause as they stepped out of their stock cars. The sensation of their feet sinking into six inches of snow left them uneasy. The icy blast of the wintery air didn't help either and the huge grey beasts trumpeted their displeasure at their handlers. But it wasn't long, a local news reporter wrote, before "they were hustled to the quarters where fires in the furnaces had been started the day before. Each elephant went to his own place and in a short time they were swaying and trumpeting with delight feel-

ing at home again."¹ The same brick building that warmed the mighty pachyderms that wintery night still stands on Water Street at Circus World. The building was more than just shelter from the harsh Wisconsin winters. It was the center of the development of the Ringling elephant herd in the years between 1897 and 1918. It was here the elephants spent the winter. Here they trained and rehearsed the acts for the next season's shows. Here some were born, and here some died.

It has been said that a show is not a true circus until it has at least one elephant. The Ringling brothers knew this and in February 1888, a little over three years after the founding of their circus, they purchased two elephants; Babylon (an Asiatic elephant) and Fannie (an African elephant). Coincidentally, only a few months earlier, the brothers had erected the first winter quarters buildings on

229 230 231 232

Practicing Rink.

Horse Shed.

Animal Ho.

6

23 1/2

230 1/2

1 1/2

3/4 Hyd.

23 1/2

230 1/2

1 1/2

Cr. b.

232 1/2

1

Paint Shop.

Hay Stack.

Baraboo River.

Night Watchman To Have D. H. In Yard & 200' Of 2 1/2' Hose Attchd.

Water Street. The section of museum grounds that today contains the baggage horse barn, office building and Quonset hut wardrobe building was the site of the original winter quarters complex. The 1892 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for Baraboo provides the earliest glimpse of what the winter quarters then looked like. The map showed six buildings of significant size on that lot. The building located in the north-east corner of the property, approximately where the Quonset hut now stands, was identified as the “Animal House.” It is most likely here that the Ringlings first housed their embryonic elephant herd. A reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* described the building in February that year:

Not every elephant associated with the Ringling show was kept at the winter quarters grounds. In February, 1897 the *Sauk County Democrat* noted, “Prof. Sam Lockhart and his class of trained elephants have arrived at Ringlingville. The elephants are at home in the Oats building opposite

Over the next few years the Ringlings rapidly expanded their herd. By 1893, the brothers owned eight elephants. Two years later that number expanded to 15. By 1897, the show boasted 25 pachyderms. The growing herd certainly indicated the increasing success and business acumen of the brothers, but it also posed a problem. Elephants were an expensive investment and the current winter quarters buildings were clearly no longer sufficient. Space was also a real problem. In addition to their own growing show, the Ringlings had leased the John Robinson Circus (elephants included) and for a year that show was based out of the Baraboo facility.

"In order to prevent the Ringling Bros. from moving their circus headquarters away from Baraboo, the common council there has sold them a desirable piece of land for a merely nominal sum. The Ringlings will now build three large brick buildings for permanent winter quarters for their circus."⁵

Local builder Carl Isenberg was awarded the contract to construct the building. Isenberg was 40 years old by the time the elephant house was built and a native of Berndorf, Germany where he learned the carpenter trade under the tutelage of his father. After a stint in the Prussian army, he immigrated to America, first arriving in New York City

and then moved on to Madison, Wisconsin where he considered studying law for a brief time. By 1885 he was in Baraboo having settled on a career as a builder. Over the next 55 years he developed his reputation and his business becoming, perhaps, the most prominent builder in Baraboo. Isenberg was responsible for the construction of numerous houses both great and small through the city including at least one church, and several Ringling mansions. Along Water Street he is credited with building or expanding most of the winter quarter buildings after 1897.⁷

Construction started in August and by late September the foundation for the new elephant house was nearly finished. The decision to use brick may have reflected the investment the Ringlings had in their exotic animals. A majority of the buildings at the winter quarters were made of wood, covered in sheet metal or tar paper. Brick provided additional insulation from the harsh Wisconsin winters. Though Baraboo had at least one brickyard by the 1890s, the cream color bricks used in construction suggest that the Ringlings looked elsewhere for this important building material, most likely Portage or Milwaukee. The building had at least one stove in the front near the Water Street doors. Photographic evidence shows a chimney, now gone, on the north side (Water Street) near the main entrance to the building. The chimney stacks were still visible in the 1960s, but are not present today. If one looks inside, however, the lower half of the chimneys can still be seen. By October 27, the building was finished and ready to receive the elephants when they came off the road in November.⁸ The cost for the new elephant house was approximately \$5,000, an equivalent of \$140,702 in 2017 dollars.⁹

The cost of such a structure was justified by a reporter several years later in the *Milwaukee Journal*:

“...despite the solicitude some of the beasts sicken and die. Elephants are the greatest loss, and they are becoming more valuable every day because of the scarcity. The death of a fine specimen means a loss of at least \$5,000. The Ringling Brothers have lost several elephants within the last few years. Camels frequently die in winter quarters, but they are more easily replaced than African elephants. There is no life insurance on wild beasts, and each casualty is a serious diminution in the profits of a season.”¹⁰

Though weather and illness may indeed have been the cause of elephant deaths at Baraboo, there were other causes as well. In 1893, an unnamed elephant died when it swallowed four feet of chain.¹¹

The new elephant house measured, 60 x 65 feet, had a wood floor, and was equipped with manure clean-out openings on both the east and west walls. These openings were covered with wooden doors and may have also allowed for ventilation when weather permitted.¹² A reporter for the *Baraboo Republic* noted, “The animals are chained to the walls and in the center there is a space the size of the



A remnant of the original wooden floor can still be seen in the southeast corner of the main room.



One of the few still remaining manure/ventilation doors found on the east and west walls of the elephant house.



Original tether rings still line many of the walls.

usual circus ring for the purpose of training during the winter."¹³ A door on the southern wall, facing the river, led to an additional outdoor practice ring. No windows were installed at the ground level, a precaution against curious elephants that might have broken the glass with their trunks. Six dormers, however, were included with windows allowing for natural light and ventilation.

The building served the Ringlings well for 13 years, but by the fall of 1910, the size of the elephant herd again required more space. When the Ringlings returned to Baraboo that winter they also brought with them the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Bros. Circus. The combined herd now quartered at Ringlingville rose to 37 elephants.¹⁴ Once again the brothers turned to their stand-by contractor Carl Isenberg and extended the building towards the river an additional 30 feet. With the additional space the elephant house was now capable of housing as many as 50 elephants, but it is doubtful that many were ever kept there at one time.¹⁵ After the 1911 season, the Ringlings took the Forepaugh-Sells show off the road and a number of elephants were sold, reducing the herd to 28.

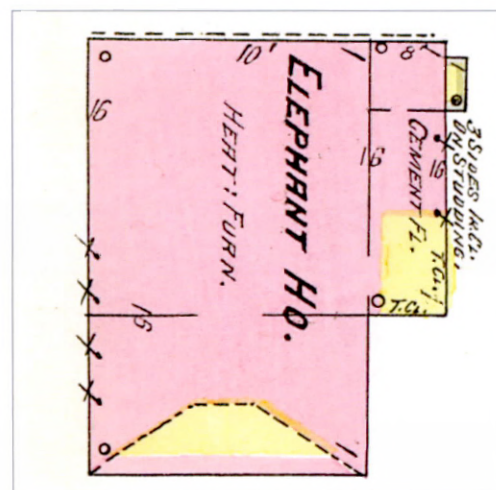
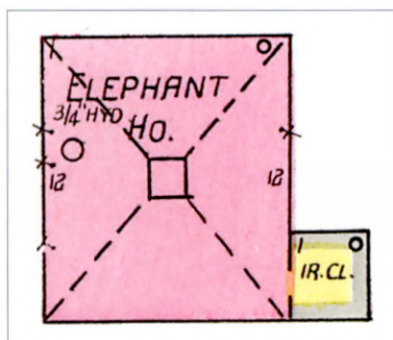
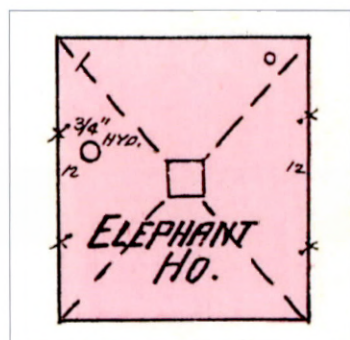
The new addition cost \$2,000.00 (\$48,787.00 in 2017 dollars) and altered the original roofline from a double hipped roof to a gabled roof on the south end of the building.¹⁶ The floor of the addition was just under two and a half feet lower than the original portion of the house, and



A group of four elephants practice behind the elephant house. In the background one can see the original southern configuration of the house before the 1910 addition.

was also built with manure/ventilation doors and tether rings near the base of the walls. Several small windows were included at the top of the walls complete with iron bars to protect the glass from inquisitive elephant trunks. The addition also included a hay loft which extended into the original portion of the house.

The hay loft was an important feature. Given the vast amounts the Ringlings purchased on a daily basis, hay was an expensive commodity and for decades was kept in large mounds outside exposed to the weather. A news reporter for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* noted in 1902, "A most interesting diversion of the Ringling outfit is a head of twenty-five elephants who are making a hole in the last season's re-



Outlines of the elephant house. At left, the original building in 1898. At center, a 1904 drawing shows the addition of the living quarters. At right, a 1913 drawing shows the final configuration.



A view down Water Street showing the elephant house after the 1910 renovations.

ceipts by devouring 4,500 pounds of hay every twenty-four hours.”¹⁷ The elephants were fed 500 pounds in the morning, 500 pounds at noon and finally 3,500 pounds every night. This may seem an exaggeration, but another reporter noted in 1914 “It takes some feed to satisfy ‘stock’ like this: 2,600 tons of hay this winter is one item. Teams are constantly hauling supplies.”¹⁸

Though the elephant house was home to the mighty pachyderms it was also a place of work, and training was always going on. In 1902, a reporter for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* noted:

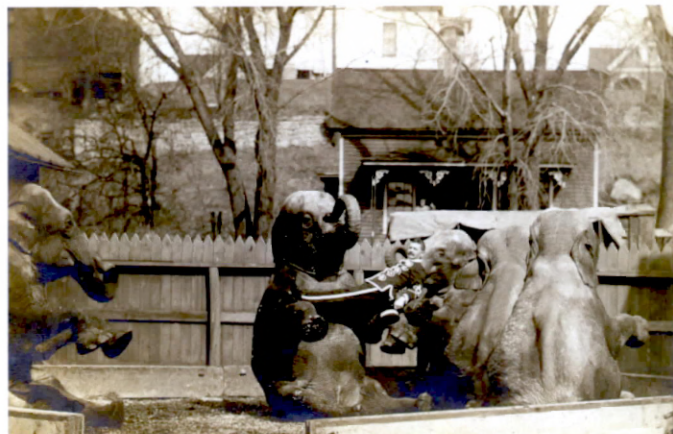
“During the hours of daylight they [the elephants] are put through a series of new tricks, which will be brought out next season. The building in which they are housed is a large one and contains a ring in the center in which they are put through their exercises in herds of four or five at a time by P. E. Souder, who is in charge of the department, and his assistants.”¹⁹

The new addition also included a practice ring as described by a news reporter in 1914:

The adjoining ‘bull barn,’ or elephant house, is as big and roomy as would be expected necessary for the accommodation of such bulky boarders. There



The hayloft as seen today.



Elephant Superintendent Pearl Souder reclines among his elephants, circa 1904. Of the eight Superintendents in charge of the elephant herd when the Ringlings were in Baraboo, Souder served the longest (1895-1908) and was in charge of the Elephant Department when the elephant house was built in 1897.

is a sunken ring here also, and the big brutes are put through their paces daily, learning new tricks and keeping in practice. Forty fine specimens are quartered here. A dozen or more stand around the edge of the ring awaiting their turn.²⁰

When the elephants were not being fed or trained, they were cleaned, especially in the spring as the show prepared to go back on tour. A reporter for the *Arizona Republic* witnessed the methodical process in 1903.

“No human being’s skin gets more attention than the hides of these big animals. They are brushed and scrubbed time and again each day. Twice a year they get a real Turkish bath, and this process is a slow one



A view of the interior showing the addition built in 1910. A practice ring would have been located at the center of this room.



A regular site at Ringlingville. An unidentified elephant stands on two tubs as employees of the elephant department trim and file its nails.

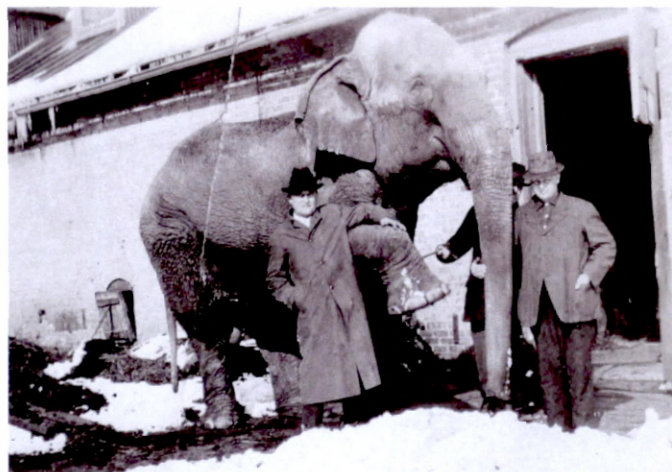
taking nearly a month, and keeps half a dozen men busy.”²¹

A Turkish bath would suggest repeated washings with both warm and cold water and steam. Whereas it is doubtful that the elephants received that kind of treatment, it is possible that the reporter saw keepers at Ringlingville giving the elephants a thorough wash down with water. After the cleaning an extensive effort went into oiling the skin. Toenails also had to be carefully filed down.²²

The elaborate care as well as the size, strength, and intelligence of the pachyderms required constant supervision.



The east wall of the elephant house showing the caretakers living quarters. The red, metal-clad section marks the original 1901-02 quarters, the brick extension was added in 1910.



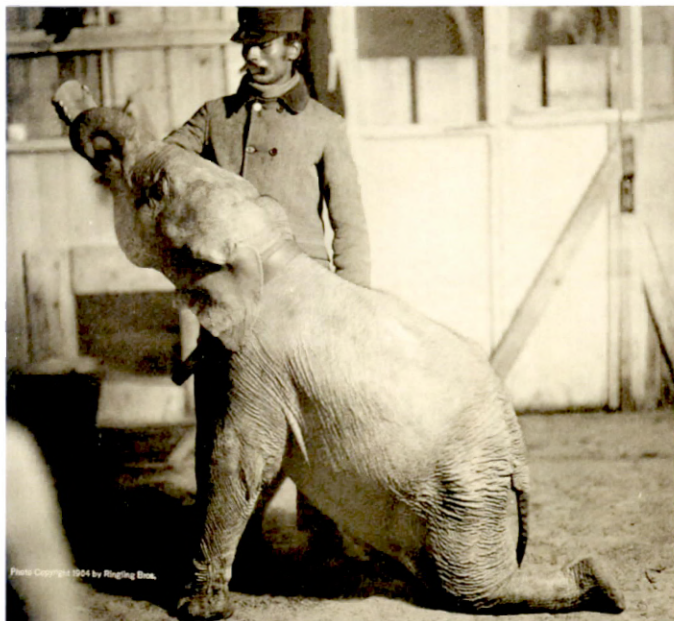
Several men and an unidentified elephant stand by the west door of the elephant house. A manure/ventilation opening can be seen at left.

As a result, the elephant house was the only animal structure in Ringlingville that included living quarters for the attendant staff. As originally built, the house did not include any living quarters for the elephant keepers, but in the winter of 1901-02, a 15 foot square addition was built on the southeast corner of the house. Unlike the main building, this was a simple structure consisting of a wooden frame single room with metal siding and a chimney allowing for a stove. The living quarters was nearly tripled in size during the 1910 renovations.

Details regarding the winter staff of the Ringling Elephant Department are not extensive for the early years, but winter quarters employee ledgers for 1911 through 1916 indicate the department usually employed 8 to 13 men depending on the year, including the elephant superintendent. Each man in the department was paid \$3.50 per week. The superintendent received \$11.65.²³

The cleaning, feeding, and training made for painstaking work, but working in the elephant department at Ringlingville could also be a life-threatening experience, especially when an elephant was about to give birth. Two elephants were born in Baraboo, both to the same mother, Alice. The first baby, Nick (also sometimes referred to as Ned), was born in November, 1900. Alice however rejected the calf and tried to trample it. Though she slowly came to accept the baby, she refused to nurse which may have resulted in Nick's death after 13 weeks. This may have been the birth referred to a year later in the *Eau Claire Leader*:

“The winter quarters are substantial buildings, some of them brick. One of them we saw had the corner walls literally kicked out by a female elephant



An unidentified trainer feeds Nick inside one of the buildings at the Ringling winter quarters in Baraboo.

in birth pangs. The wall is now bound by an iron clamp.”²⁴

Two years later Alice gave birth to a second calf, but this one's life was so short it never received a name.²⁵ This second birth was proof that life as an employee in the elephant department could be exceptionally dangerous. When Alice went into labor, she was taken to the practice ring in the ring barn next door. Perhaps thinking of Nick, Charles Ringling had the mother chained and the baby “rushed it to a nearby room with a huge oak door closed and barred – but with a lunge or two the mother broke loose and went right through the door after the men and her baby. The men fled for their lives and the mother stamped the baby to death.”²⁶

The seasonal bustle of activity surrounding the winter quarters came to an abrupt halt when the Ringling circus left Baraboo for the last time in the spring of 1918. At the end of that season the show returned to winter quarters, not in Baraboo, but in Bridgeport, Connecticut under the newly combined title Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. The elephant house along with the rest of Ringlingville was mothballed and maintained by a single caretaker who lived out of the old office building.²⁷

The various heirs of the Ringling brothers retained joint ownership of the property and through the 1920s rented the buildings to an assortment of local businesses. Some buildings were used as an egg hatchery and an International Harvester dealership. Others were used for hay



PS-19 Ringlingville circa 1927 when the Feinberg Auto Wrecking Co. leased the elephant house.



The elephant house circa 1936 when it was used by the Baraboo Livestock Commission. The wooden braces and metal rods in the northeast corner of the building may be a brace installed as reinforcement after the elephant Alice knocked out part of the wall in 1900.



The elephant house when it was owned by the Fullmer Transfer Co., circa 1949. The loading dock and door seen at right was added by the company sometime after 1939 and has since been removed.

storage and warehouses for whole sugar.²⁸ Ringlingville, the *Baraboo News Republic* noted, had “fallen into disuse” and “The circus atmosphere as might be expected is rather well lost amid the activity.”²⁹ The elephant house was empty for a while, and became a favorite stomping ground for local children who played with abandoned equipment and tossed dried lumps of elephant dung at each other.³⁰ By 1927 it was

leased to the Feinberg Auto Wrecking Co. Five years later, in June 1932, two local business men, Adolph Andro and Ferdinand Effinger purchased all of Ringlingville from the surviving Ringling heirs with plans to redevelop the property. Over the course of the next decade the two men leased or sold the buildings off piecemeal.³¹ A photograph from 1936 shows the elephant house being used by the Baraboo Livestock Commission where one could stable, buy, or exchange horses.

Andro and Effinger sold the elephant barn to the Fullmer Transfer Company in 1939 and for 21 years the building was used as an automotive garage and for storage. A local reporter remarked "Where elephants used to roar, automobile motors are today doing the roaring."³² The Wisconsin Historical Society purchased the building in 1960 for its new Circus World Museum and over the next two years renovated the building to house an exhibit highlighting the big top tent. The elephant house, along with eight other Ringlingville buildings, was designated as a National

Historic Landmark in 1969. Subsequent years have seen multiple uses of the building by the museum. Exhibits have always dominated the upper level but for a brief time in the late 1960s, the lower section served the wagon restoration department and the former living quarters for the caretakers was used as the museum's business office.³³ Though some modifications have been done, much of the original building remains intact. The wooden floor was removed and replaced, but one can still see the rings set in the wall and the manure openings (though some are bricked up) still retain their original doors. The hayloft is intact and the floor plan looks much as it did when the Ringlings left Baraboo in 1918. Today the building is open to the public, and houses revolving exhibits. To the untrained eye the elephant house may seem unassuming, a relatively modest, old, brick building. But it is a building that holds an amazing history. It is a testament to the early development of a show that would grow to dominate the circus community and one of the most unique buildings in the United States. **Bw**

Endnotes

1. *Baraboo Republic* (Baraboo, Wisconsin), Nov 28, 1906.
2. *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, Illinois), Feb 6, 1892.
3. *Sauk County Democrat* (Baraboo, Wisconsin), Feb 4 1897.
4. *Sauk County Democrat* (Baraboo, Wisconsin), Sept. 16, 1897; Logansport Reporter (Logansport, Indiana), July 10, 1894.
5. *The Oshkosh Northwestern* (Oshkosh, Wisconsin), Sept. 11, 1897.
6. Land Acquisition Records, CWM - Fullmer Parcel, Abstract for Quonset Hut, Warehouse and House, 322 Water St., Entry 29 and 32, Robert L. Parkinson Library, Circus World. The Ringlings bought the majority of the new property from J. B. and Alice Wise.
7. *Baraboo News Republic* (Baraboo, Wisconsin), Feb 7, 1934.
8. *The Baraboo Republic* (Baraboo, Wisconsin), Oct 27, 1897.
9. *Sauk County Democrat* (Baraboo, Wisconsin), Oct 21, 1897. The combined cost for all three buildings was \$15,000; The completion of the elephant house was announced in *The Baraboo Republic* (Baraboo, Wisconsin), Oct 27, 1897. The conversion to 2017 dollars for this figure and all others in this article was done through an inflation calculator found at <http://www.in2013dollars.com/1860-dollars-in-2015-amount=1>
10. "The Circus in Winter Quarters" *Milwaukee Journal* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), January 27, 1900
11. *The Oshkosh Northwestern* (Oshkosh, Wisconsin) Jan 6, 1893. The Ringling's may have disposed of the dead elephants locally. Two accounts suggest separate burial sites, one on the south side of the Baraboo River just east of the museum and the other, a farm on the north of town.
12. Fred Dahlinger to Greg Parkinson, "Ringlingville Elephant House Mini-Assessment," December 23, 1998 on file on file at the Robert L. Parkinson Library at Circus World.
13. *The Baraboo Republic*, (Baraboo, Wisconsin), Oct 27, 1897
14. Pfening, Fred, Jr. "The Final Years Adam Forepaugh and Sells Bros. Big United Shows: Part Two, 1911," *Bandwagon*, Vol. 39, No 4, 1995, p 4.
15. *Baraboo Republic* (Baraboo, Wisconsin), Sept 15, 1910.
16. *Sauk County Democrat* (Baraboo, Wisconsin), Feb 2, 1911.
17. *Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), Feb 9, 1902.
18. Details regarding the massive consumption hay at Ringlingville can be found in Dunkle, W. W. "A Day at Baraboo," *Billboard*, March 21, 1914, p. 37; *Baraboo Weekly News* (Baraboo, Wisconsin), Jan 30, 1913.
19. *Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), Feb 9, 1902.
20. W. W. Dunkle, "A Day at Baraboo," p 37.
21. An article detailing this cleaning and oiling process can be found in the *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, Arizona), July 24, 1903.
22. Ibid.
23. The lowest number of employees for this period, including the Elephant Superintendent was 8 men in the winter of 1912-13. The largest number was the winter of 1914-15 when the department employed 13 men. Details regarding the staff of the elephant department at Ringlingville can be found in five "Winter Workingmen Time" books covering the winters of 1911-12, 1912-13, 1913-14, 1914-15, 1915-16 on file at the Robert L. Parkinson Library at Circus World.
24. *Eau Claire Leader* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) Wed June 17, 1903.
25. Reynolds, Richard J. "Baraboo's Baby Elephants," *Bandwagon*, Vol. 37, No. 6, 1993, p. 4-5.
26. *Williston Graphic* (Williston, North Dakota) Nov. 6, 1902, Reynolds, "Baraboo's Baby Elephants," p. 5-6.
27. Unidentified news clipping, "Old Ringling Office Sold," Friday March 24, 1930. Found in file "Ringlingville Research Resources, Primary Materials (2)," Robert L. Parkinson Library, Circus World.
28. 1927 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map.
29. Letter, *Baraboo News Republic* to Plumer McClintock March 31, 1932, Found in file Ringlingville Research Materials, Primary Resources, Robert L. Parkinson Library, Circus World.
30. Apps, Jerry and Fred Dahlinger. 2014. *Ringlingville USA: the Stupendous Story of Seven Siblings and Their Stunning Circus Success*. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, p. 215.
31. Abstract Fullmer Property, Animal House and Horse Barn; Unidentified news clipping "Ringlings' Property in Baraboo is Sold," 1932, in "Wisconsin-Baraboo (1908-1969)" Vertical File, Robert L. Parkinson Library, Circus World.
32. *Baraboo News*, (Baraboo, Wisconsin), Mar 2, 1939.
33. Land acquisition records, CWM - Fullmer Parcel, Robert L. Parkinson Library, Circus World; *Green Bay Press-Gazette* (Green Bay, Wisconsin), Nov 24, 1962; Conversation with Harold "Heavy" Burdick, Circus World Wagon Superintendent, July, 2017.

An Interview with Mary Jane Miller



Mary Jane Miller performed on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey from 1942 through 1954. The following interview with her was conducted by Julie Parkinson on October 24, 2016 at Bob's Train Car in Sarasota, Florida.

Julie Parkinson (JP): You grew up in Michigan, right?

Mary Jane Miller (MJM): Grand Rapids.

JP: What brought you to Sarasota?

MJM: We had an ice cream store and so we took vacations in the winter. My mother had met some relative or friend in Sarasota and said oh, I'd like to go back to Sarasota. So we got a travel trailer – five of us in a travel trailer – and came to Sarasota. We stayed in a trailer park, and that's where I met Glenna, the 18 year old girl whose parents were clowns. I went with her to watch rehearsals [at the winter quarters], and that's how I got interested in the circus. I had graduated from high school. I was studying to be a secretary, and I hated it. I hated math, and I hated bookkeeping. So with the circus

Mary Jane Miller posed for Sverre Braathen's camera wearing "Changing of the Guard" wardrobe on the lot in Madison, Wisconsin, August 22, 1946.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

I thought, oh, that'd be fun. I'll just go do that. Reluctantly, my mother gave me permission to go, and I joined the circus, and I spent 13 years there.

JP: You were about 19 years old when you joined?

MJM: Yes.

JP: Who hired you?

MJM: Pat Valdo. Tuffy Genders was the one that taught me to climb up and do all the routines, but Pat Valdo was the one that hired me. He was the performance director. Tuffy taught you everything.

JP: I remember hearing that they were immediately impressed with your aerial ability and that's why they hired you on the spot.

MJM: Well, they had me climb up the web right away. Some of the showgirls couldn't even make it halfway up. They got scared and had to have someone help them down.

JP: Did you have any aerial background at that point?

MJM: No, I just liked climbing trees. My mother would get mad. She'd put dresses on me and I'd keep tearing them up. I was a real tomboy. I never did any gymnastics in school or anything like that. I was just a tomboy running up hills, seeing how fast I could run. I remember that.

JP: So you were initially hired as a showgirl?

MJM: Yes, just as one of the girls. I didn't know how to do an act so I joined as a girl.

JP: Did you start riding elephants right away?

MJM: No, it was just a couple of years...first all you'd do was in the spec. I would pull a wagon. I was "Mary Had a Little Lamb." ...Then, of course, I'd practice, in between shows. Tuffy Genders and I would learn how to do things, and eventually they would say; OK, now you're in spec, now you're going to do this, and I was fortunate. They put me on a beautiful float and [in a] beautiful costume. It was called the Champagne Float, and that was one of the prettiest things I ever did. Pat Valdo always liked me and gave me good parts in the show. And when you're a showgirl, you're in everything. You're in the wagon that goes around, with the girls dressed up with the fancy clothes. You're on the web. You're in spec. You're

in all the different production numbers. You're in the finale, the very last thing. You're in everything. I mean you just do everything.

JP: You said a couple of years later you started riding the elephants?

MJM: Yes, whenever it was. Whenever the elephant routine came up, they'd say basically you're going to do elephants. I'd say OK. I was lucky enough to ride the elephants. Oh, I loved it.

JP: I understand that you joined the show in 1942. That would have been at the end of the Walter McLain era. Do you remember him?

MJM: I remember him and his wife, but I didn't actually know anything about him. The only thing I did actually with the elephants was I'd just ride them in the spec, you know I didn't do [meaning help present] the elephant act.

JP: At your presentation at the 2016 Circus Historical Society convention, I heard you say that when you started riding elephants, one of them shook you off?

MJM: Oh, she threw me. Mary was her name. She was mean. I didn't know it and neither did Pat Valdo, but I got on her and she just went "Rrrrrr!" She threw me off, and I hit the

ground running. Pat Valdo said, "No one's ever gonna get on that elephant again." So they took her out of the spec part, they didn't use her at all. The other elephants I had, you know they were wonderful. The one, she'd put her trunk out and I'd step on it, and she'd throw me up there. I'd bring her sugar cubes all the time. She loved the sugar cubes. They all waited for that. Most of the elephants were really gentle and nice.

JP: What were your thoughts when you learned that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey would no longer have elephants?

MJM: I have mixed feelings of not having elephants in the circus. ...even though I loved watching them perform, and I think the elephants enjoyed it. Jackie [Le Claire] and I were talking about it this morning...and then we remembered how they used blow torches to get the hair off the elephants. It wouldn't hurt the elephants, but they would blow torch them to get the hair down.

JP: Your last season was 1954, so the entire time you were on the show it was under canvas, correct?

MJM: Yeah, right. Well after the fire, they put them [the performances] on in baseball fields. ...We closed in July, came to Sarasota, and then...we went back out. We worked in ball parks, places like that, for the rest of the season.



A performance of the elephant ballet choreographed by George Balanchine for the 1942 season.

Circus World Museum

JP: So you were on the show the day of the Hartford fire?

MJM: Yes.

JP: What do you remember about that day?

MJM: Well, I was half dressed, getting ready to go to the aerial act, and someone said, "There's a fire." We raised the canvas to look and we could see the fire on top of the big top. I was half dressed so I grabbed a robe or something, but some of the girls – especially the Antalek sisters – they were taking a bath in the bucket. They got so scared, they jumped, naked, and they ran outside. Some town people were nice, and they put some coats on them or whatever. Everybody just ran. I remember looking out there and gosh, and it was so fast. It was like a flash, and the whole tent was on fire. My [future] husband was taking tickets in the front at the time. He walked through the big top and always stopped and talked to Merle Evans. He was just talking and he saw that. He looked up there and said, "Merle!" And right away, immediately, Merle [and his band] started playing this song – "The Stars and Stripes Forever." My husband said all these people started rushing out, and this lady handed him a little girl. She said, "Here take her," and she had burns on her. My husband grabbed her and he took her outside and laid her down. He had burns on his uniform from her. She was the little girl [Little Miss 1565] that they never found [out] who she was for years and years and years. That's the little girl that my husband laid down. It was my husband's birthday, the day of the fire, so I remember that so well, just like it was yesterday.

JP: What was the act that was going on?

MJM: The Wallendas. ...Because the animal cages were set, already there, a lot of people couldn't get out. They couldn't get past the runs [chutes] where the animals were going to go through. They couldn't get through. ...They got trapped, a lot of people, it was really tragic. We spent about a week there before they let us

Elephants stride in one of the 1943 production numbers transporting lavishly costumed performers riding aboard howdahs. Although not identified in this photo, Mary Jane Miller routinely appeared in the specs and productions between 1942 and 1954.

Circus World Museum

leave. Every day we would go to the lot and see if we could help or do something...then go to town and eat. ...We all went to the movie that one day, and in the middle of the movie, someone said, "The train is getting ready to leave, come on." Everybody left the theatre and ran to the train because they knew the train was leaving for Sarasota.

JP: Tell me about your husband. What was his name?

MJM: His name was Dick Miller. He was a ticket seller, and then he became a photographer. That's why I have so many pictures of me, because he took my picture.

JP: When were you married?

MJM: Nineteen forty-five. My maiden name was DeYoung – Dutch, Grand Rapids, Dutch.

JP: Did you go to Lido Beach back then when the casino was out there?

MJM: Oh yeah, we loved the casino. Every Sunday, we went to the casino. Every Sunday. ...the worst thing they ever did



is tear down that casino. Such a beautiful thing. It just made me sick.

JP: I wish I could have seen that, and I wish I could have seen the John Ringling Hotel.

MJM: *Oh, I worked there. We would do the shows there, and I would do the web act.*

JP: When you and your husband left the road in 1954, why did you decide to live permanently in Sarasota?

MJM: *There was no place else to go. My husband worked for a newspaper here...and it went broke. Then he got ill...and he died. Rick [our son] was nine years old. My mother had an RV supply store that she started in 1942. So when I had Rick, I started working for my mother. I was there for years and years running the business, so I was a business woman. The store was Florida Trailer Headquarters, right off of [Hwy] 301. I worked there until I retired, four or five years ago [She retired in December 2006]. I...ran the whole thing by myself. A couple of guys helped me whenever I needed help, but I ran it.*

JP: There are quite a few circus people in the Sarasota area. I know that you and Jackie are very close. Are there others that you worked with?

MJM: *There are not too many left. A lot of them have died – Dolly Copeland – Jeanne Sleeter, she's still here, but so many of them are gone.*

JP: La Norma Fox was on the show from 1949 through 1951, and she was the stunt double for Betty Hutton in the movie. What was she like?

MJM: *...She was a great [trapeze star]. One of the best, she was absolutely great. She comes every month to Showfolks... She's a nice, nice lady.*

JP: What years were you writing and sending Ringling-Barnum reports to *Billboard*?

MJM: *Probably through the '40s. I don't know exactly what years. Someone said, didn't you save all those? I said no, I didn't save them. ...It was so long ago. I mean I'm 94 years old. ...I did it several years, but I'm not sure how many.*

JP: My great uncle, Tom Parkinson, was the circus editor for *Billboard* for many years. Do you remember him?

MJM: Yes.

JP: I wonder if what you wrote you ever sent to my uncle. Do you know if there was a time when you actually worked

directly with him?

MJM: *I just wrote the articles, and I mailed them in.*

JP: How did you start doing that?

MJM: *I don't remember. Somebody said can you write something to let people know what's going on? I had a typewriter and I would type up stuff and mail it in. I would always have to find a place to mail it, you know in different towns.*

JP: So you would write about who was new on the show and things like that?

MJM: *Yes, and whose birthday it was. And I had to mention the names of the circus fans who visited. They didn't like it if you missed their name. So and so was there, you know. That was a prerequisite thing.*

JP: I know you had just joined the show, but did you perform in "The Ballet of the Elephants," the production choreographed by George Balanchine?

MJM: *Yes, we were all in that.*

JP: You had just joined the show, right?

MJM: *Yeah. It was in '42.*

JP: Did you realize at that point how many great producers and composers and famous people were involved with that? I mean you were so young.

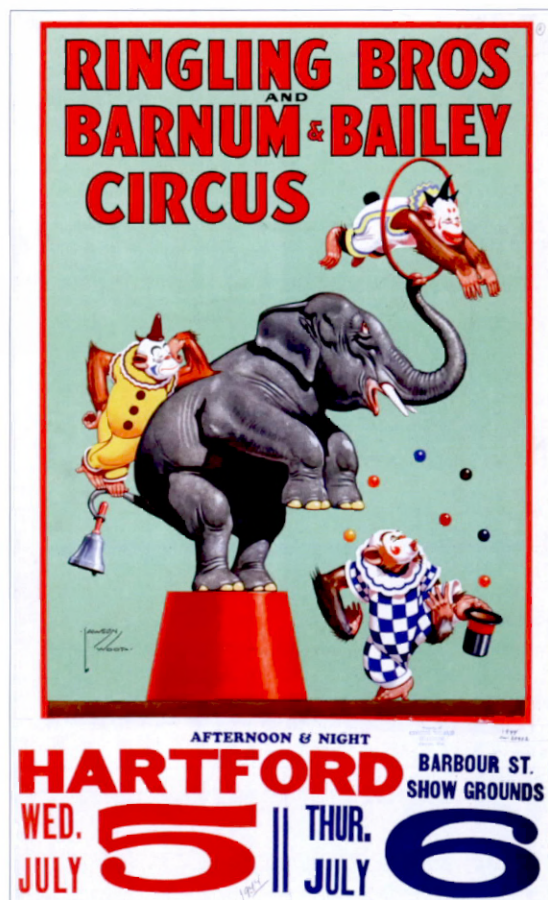
MJM: *I didn't realize how they were famous. I mean they were just there. I remember they were really artistic. When they came to the circus, they were sort of shocked. ...Circus people weren't used to all this classical type stuff. It was really a contrast, it really was.*

JP: I'm sure being able to do ballet in the sawdust was a little different (Mary Jane laughs).

MJM: *Some of them were kind of put off with it. When Robert Ringling was in charge [beginning in 1943], he just couldn't believe some of the stuff was not up where he thought it should be classically. You know he was an opera singer. He thought everything should be theatrical. He didn't realize circus was circus. It's a rough type thing, but he didn't like that.*

JP: What do you remember about the menagerie fire in Cleveland? What do you recall about that day?

MJM: *Oh it was terrible. I mean we were shopping, and I came back from shopping. ...The elephants were...in the front end of the menagerie. And how the fire started I don't know. I don't know if they ever found out, but those poor elephants*



A half sheet poster with a date tag for the 1944 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey show in Hartford
Circus World Museum

were just burned. It was terrible. The veterinarians came...and tried to put stuff on them, you know oil or salve or whatever they put on them. ...I don't think any of the public was there [in the menagerie] yet. It was before the show...so no town people were around.

JP: I believe four elephants died in the fire.

MJM: I think so, it was very bad. I felt bad for those elephants. ... You know some things you remember vaguely and some things you remember a little bit better, and I remember right where the dressing room was. I remember that and I remember right where the menagerie was...

JP: Did they go ahead and have a performance that night?

MJM: I think we did, I think we put on a show. Yes. You know they say the show must go on...

JP: What do you remember about working with Hugo Schmitt?

MJM: I didn't know him...what year did he come on?

JP: Nineteen forty-eight. He left after the 1949 season, and then came back in your last year, 1954.

MJM: I remember, but I wasn't in any acts close to him at all. ...I knew of him, but I never had any contact with him at all.

JP: What types of things did you do during the elephant acts?

MJM: Well, I'd be sitting on the heads, but when they did their routines, I never got down in the ring and made them get down or get up. I would sit on their heads [throughout the act]. In fact...in *The Greatest Show on Earth* [the film], when they had, you know, Gloria Grahame...the foot comes right close, well I was on her head, on that elephant. I remember that.

JP: Being a part of the movie must have been fun. What else stands out about the filming?

MJM: It was an interesting thing, it really was. I sometimes think back to how they did everything then. It was probably very primitive to the way they do things now, but Cecil B. DeMille was there with his mic thing, and it was really great. It was a great experience.

JP: Didn't he travel with the show for part of the season before?

MJM: I don't remember that, but he was a nice man. Charlton Heston was nice. Cornel Wilde was nice. Dorothy Lamour was great, everybody loved her. Gloria Grahame was nice. Betty Hutton didn't associate with us. She had a foul mouth. Oh my God, she'd say anything, anything! I mean she was an energetic... How she ended up her life the way she did, it's crazy, I mean, she was something else.

JP: In 1996 I was in costume at a Ringling-Barnum benefit in LA and Charlton Heston was there. Someone took a picture of me and another performer with him, and it ended up in the *National Enquirer*.

MJM: Oh! He was a nice guy.

JP: Were you actually in the movie where you can say, "There I am," at a particular point?

MJM: Yeah, ...I'm in a little [covered] wagon, with Rusty Parent [bare-back rider] and I'm holding a shotgun. I have a hat on, and the camera comes right up close to me. And then...there's someone hanging by their teeth [iron jaw], and it's me too, but you don't know it's me. And I'm on the elephant and you don't know it's me. But it was fun, very fun. ...but you know, I had a life before the circus and I had a life after the circus. ...I was circus for 14 years, and now I'm still involved in some things... I enjoyed it while I was there, but I don't remember a lot of historical stuff about the circus. I don't. That wasn't part of my life.

JP: No, but you have a great story. I think a lot of people that come into the circus that aren't from a circus family don't stay as long as you did.

MJM: *I enjoyed it. I met a lot of wonderful people. The experience was great. I have done a lot of things since then, but it's something that I will always treasure. It's something that will always mean a lot to me.*

JP: Is there anything else about your circus experiences that you would like to share? Did you have a favorite elephant or one that you rode for several years?

MJM: *Yes, I rode the same one. Her name was Ruth. I'm pretty sure it was Ruth, but I rode the same one all the time, and she got to know me and I got to know her. Elephants were always part of the circus. I hate to see that go away. It's like if you would say, there's no more trapeze. Now there's no more elephants. Circus is elephants. ...I'm glad the elephants are going to have a nice place to be and not have to work...but in another way, a lot of these young kids – they're going to miss out. They're going to miss what the circus was... I mean circus is circus with elephants and the smell of the sawdust and all that. It's an era that's going away. ... Many years from now they'll say, oh remember, there used to be a big top. What's a big top? Kids aren't going to remember that. So things change.*

JP: Were you and Jackie friends when you both worked on the Ringling show?

MJM: *No we weren't. We didn't become close until afterwards.*

JP: But you did work together?

MJM: *Trapeze. We were two [separate] trapeze [acts], he was here and I was there one time. But we weren't close then at all. We hardly knew each other. He became a hairdresser afterwards, and he did my hair. ...So he's done quite a few other things besides the clowning, but he's still...called the Ambassador of Mirth.*

JP: Could you list the different types of acts you did? I didn't realize that you were a flyer.

MJM: *Well, the spec. I did the flying act. I did the web act, the ladder act, and single trapeze. I did all those in different years. I never rode horses. That's one thing I never did. Rode elephants, but not horses.*

JP: So would you say you were primarily an aerialist?

MJM: *Yeah, just one of the girls. Doing aerial work and all.*

JP: You were more than just one of the girls!

MJM: *Well sometimes I think of all the stuff I did, and now I'm afraid to step two feet off the ground (Mary Jane laughs). **Bw***

Interviewer's Notes

Photographs of Mary Jane Miller on a single trapeze appeared in issues of *Life* magazine in 1946 and 1953. She performed in Ringling-Barnum flying-return acts for several years beginning in the mid-1940s. The 1952 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey route book lists Mary



Mary Jane styles on the single trapeze.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

Jane Miller as the Assistant to the Aerial Director, Antoinette Concello. She and Antoinette were two of the six production staff members who reported to Pat Valdo that year. A photograph of Mary Jane hanging on a single trapeze was included in the 1954 Ringling-Barnum program with the caption, "Mary Jane Miller, accomplished all around aerial artist."

From 1947 through 1953 Mary Jane wrote and furnished a column published in *Billboard* under the "Dressing Room Gossip" banner. In 1954, her last season on the show, she submitted similar show news directly to Tom Parkinson (*Billboard* circus editor from 1950 to 1960) for his "Under the Marquee" column about circus personnel and happenings on various shows.

Mary Jane continues to live in Sarasota, Florida – her hometown for the past 75 years.

An Interview with **Richard I. Houck, DVM**



Gunther Gebel-Williams holds a leopard cub just delivered to him by his friend and colleague Richard "Doc" Houck.

Circus World Museum

Dr. Richard I. Houck was hired by Kenneth Feld in 1984 and served as Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey staff veterinarian for 18 years. After he retired from that official position, he continued to consult with succeeding Ringling veterinarians and Feld Entertainment animal presenters. Houck received his Doctorate of Veterinary Medicine from Iowa State University in 1957. During his years with the circus, he provided expert veterinary care to many of the most famous performing animals of all time. Included were the Living Unicorn, Gunther's leopard Kenny (that appeared in the American Express commercial), Siegfried & Roy's menagerie of white lions and tigers, King Tusk,

Romeo and Juliette, and of course, scores of other Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey elephants. The following interview with Doc Houck was conducted by Julie Parkinson and Greg Parkinson on February 11, 2017 at his rural home near Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

Julie Parkinson (JP): You wrote the preface for Gunther's autobiography, *Untamed*, and you knew him well. Let's start with your thoughts about him as an animal trainer and performer.

Doc Houck (DH): *I was proud to be asked to write the preface for Gunther's biography, and over the years I really tried*

to figure out Gunther. I don't know if anyone could ever completely figure him out, but I came to the conclusion, after working with him and watching him, that his motive was really just to make the animals their best. He never really sought or wanted fame. Whenever I brought an animal to the circus, the first thing he'd want to do is take them into the arena. I'd come in the middle of the night with five new tigers. He'd want to take them into the arena, and he'd say, "Doc, look at that one, he's smart. The other one is a nablo – maybe one trick, but not so good." He always wanted them to be their best, not for himself to be famous. One time he and I were walking from the hotel to Madison Square Garden. We were walking through [the Garden] at 8:00 in the morning and there were these squares [in the floor of the lobby] – Michael Jordan, Michael Jackson, and then there was Gunther Gebel-Williams. He stopped and he said, "You know, I don't know why I'm here. I don't understand that." And I said, Gunther, you performed before more people in Madison Square Garden through the years than anyone else. "Yeah Doc, but I don't know why, why should I be famous?" He never really looked at himself as being famous, although he accepted it. That was always amazing to me.

Greg Parkinson (GP): You knew him far better than I did, but I briefly worked around Gunther in 1970 when the Red Unit played Milwaukee in conjunction with the circus parade staged by Circus World Museum. I saw him driving stakes for the elephant tent, shoveling manure, and then he performed in the Milwaukee Arena out in the spotlight. I was in awe of his energy and his command of his animals. He had a firm voice, and his elephants clearly responded to the tone of his commands. As a charismatic performer, he was one of a kind. Tell us about your earliest impressions of Gunther.

DH: When I first visited the circus to look at the animals, Gunther and Sigrid seemed to resent me being there. I said I wouldn't take the job if Gunther didn't want me to be there. I didn't apply for the job – Kenneth [Feld] called me out of the blue. I told Gunther that and he just poked me in the shoulder and he said, "You know Doc, you do more work here in two weeks than others have

done in years. You're a good man." After that, we became extraordinarily close friends. I believe we were born in the same year. [They were born very close to each other – Dr. Houck in June of 1933 and Gunther in September of 1934.] He relied on me with a lot of things, and we were really



Gunther Gebel-Williams was one of the most celebrated animal trainers in circus history.
Greg Parkinson collection

good friends. I presented the eulogy at his funeral. That was the toughest thing I ever did, but it was easy because I knew my subject. I was riding horses in Colorado, and I saw this eagle fly over when we were near the top of the mountain. It flew around, and I said, "Gunther died." I wasn't prepared. I went home, got a suit and went immediately to Florida, right to their home and hugged everybody. Sigrid said, "Doc you have to hurry up and get to the church." I asked why. "Well didn't anybody tell you you're going to do the eulogy?" I said "No! Look at my hair. I've been in the mountains for a month and a half." She said, "I'll call my beautician." And she did. When I was sitting there, relaxing in the barber chair, I thought, what am I going to say? It was very difficult. I was retired from the circus, and Janet and I went to Florida and spent a lot of time with Gunther when he was dying from cancer. One time we decided to do something that would be fun for him – we decided to take him fishing. He said, "Doc, I never went fishing in my life!" And I said "Oh I think you're going to enjoy this." I never told the skipper [of the boat] who he was, and by this time Gunther was losing all of his hair so he wasn't always recognized. I told the skipper, "This guy is so impatient. We wanna catch fish. Don't take us out nine miles. Take us right away to let us catch fish." We went out and Gunther caught a bunch of fish, including a great big grouper. We took it to the marina and had it cooked. Later I said, "Let's go get some ice cream and we had our picture taken – the two of us eating ice cream cones. And he looked around and said, "Don't these nablos ever work? Look at them! Going around in golfing carts...back and forth, back and forth." Nablo was a term he used. If [he thought] somebody was not very smart he called them a nablo. Gunther had all kinds of strange terms. If he wanted the elephants to "tail up," he said "hautry." You've got to remember that he had very little education in Germany, and in fact his German was fairly limited. So when he came here he was at a disadvantage. But he had the ability to mesmerize anybody. He'd tell me, "You know Doc, you bamboozle anybody." So that became his nickname for me, Bamboozly.

JP: You mentioned that Kenneth Feld called you out of the blue to offer you the staff position. Can you give us the backstory on that and tell us how that came about?

DH: It's a very interesting story. I practiced in Juneau [Wisconsin] for a year and Waterloo [Wisconsin] for two years, and I worked for other veterinarians. I decided to come here and set up a practice in Lake Geneva. I worked in that practice for many years. I was 50 years old and my partner was doing less and less work, and I was doing more and more. I

thought, you know, if I'm going to change careers, I better do it now. I told my partner, either I'll buy you out or you can buy me out. So he bought me out. I really had no idea what I was going to do. I didn't have anything and then on a Monday morning in November and I got a call and he said, "I'm Kenneth Feld. I own the Ringling Bros. Circus, and would like to talk to you. Would you come interview with me on Friday?" At first I answered, "Uhh...Uhh..." I have a very strong Christian faith and I'd been praying. God seemed to be saying, "Hello? You've been praying, and you don't have anything, and it's November." So I very quickly said OK. Kenneth said he would pay my expenses and to come down on Friday. They needed to get both circuses ready to go and needed some help. So I went down there [to the Venice winter quarters] and went up to his office and we talked. I asked him what he wanted me to do. He said his father had recently died, and he had taken over full control of the circus. He told me to check with the General Manager [Bob MacDougall]. So here I am with a tweed sport coat and a tie, and it's hotter than a pistol. I walked out there and said, "You Mr. MacDougall? I'm here to get your circus ready. What do you want me to do?" He said, "I'm the General Manager. Don't ask me. Go ask Gunther Gebel-Williams. He's right there." Gunther was there wearing a pair of jeans and no shirt. I went over to him and said, "I'm here to get your animals ready to go. What do you want me to do?" And he said, "Do the horses." He walked away and that was all he said! Well, horses were my long suit. I walked into the horse barn and got this guy to help me. He told me he could handle any horse. So we blood tested them, did their teeth, and vaccinated them all. Then I saw Gunther look in and I said, "We got the horses done, what do you want me to do now?" He said, "Do the elephants." So I went over and we blood tested all the elephants and I vaccinated them for tetanus. I had been there about eight days and we got all of that done and I said to Gunther, "OK, we have to do the tigers." Gunther said, "You don't know nothing about tigers." By this time I was getting a bit frustrated. I said, "I'll have those 18 tigers vaccinated in 15 minutes." Gunther laughed and said, "You show me." Well, I had done the work for John Cuneo all those years and I found out later on that Cuneo had told Kenneth that he knew "just the guy" to help him get his circus ready. But, I didn't know that then. I just had a guy back the tigers up in each cage, and I quickly vaccinated them through the bars – one after another. Gunther just looked at me. So I went up to Kenneth's office. He said I was just what he wanted and needed. I said, yeah, but Gunther doesn't want me here and his wife doesn't seem to like me. Kenneth said he didn't give a hoot about that and told me to go tell Gunther



Doc Houck treated Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey elephants, tigers, horses, and other animals for 18 years. He is seen here talking with Gunther Gebel-Williams.

Richard "Doc" Houck collection

how I felt. So I did and that's when Gunther poked me in the shoulder and said, "You're a good man."

JP: Some of Gunther's favorite elephants were ones that he brought over from Germany like Congo, Nellie, and Tetchie. Do you have any recollections about those elephants and how they interacted with you or to Gunther?

DH: Gunther had an amazing rapport with his elephants. He would often line them all up and call them out, one by one. They'd come forward, and he'd give them a treat. Then they'd back up into line. That was something that really impressed me. I don't recall that he ever indicated to me that he had a favorite, but he certainly had a lot of trust in Congo. He rode on her without anybody [walking with her] and she'd listen to him. He wanted every elephant to be its best and he had a way of getting that. He and I were both early morning people. Sometimes we would be the only ones there early in the morning. He'd go in there and talk to the elephants and

just say their names and pet them. That was the special thing for me, our early mornings together.

JP: You started with Ringling in 1984. How long did you have that position?

DH: I was there 18 years.

JP: So you were based on this land here in Wisconsin. Did you ever travel with the show for an extended period of time?

DH: At that time I was single, so I never had a reason to hurry home. I only traveled on the train a few times. Gunther was adamant about that. He'd say, "Doc you travel on the train and you're gonna drink too much beer, you play cards and they take your money, and the showgirls will come to your room." No showgirls ever came, but the other two did come true.

JP: Was it typical for you to travel between the Red and



Flavio Togni presented a mixed act of Asian elephants and palomino horses on the Ringling show from 1990 to 1991.

Greg Parkinson collection

Blue Units and Siegfried & Roy show in Las Vegas, and then be home for a week or so?

DH: Yes. I acclimated to it well.

JP: Touching on some of the other great elephant trainers you worked with, what were your impressions of Flavio Togni?

DH: Flavio was a lot like Gunther. He was the leader in his family, and they all looked up to him. He was extremely talented and what really amazed me was all that he could accomplish, even with his impaired eyesight. The family just took me right in, the Italian way. They always wanted me to come to a barbeque, usually on closing night. Flavio and I became very good friends. I became friends with everybody in the [Togni] family – Enis, Walter, and Burle [Hans Suppmier].

JP: Can you share a story or two about Axel Gautier? What stood out about him or his elephant training techniques?

DH: Axel was completely different than Gunther, he was a very private guy. He was a very good trainer, but he had men-

tors. You know Gunther was really self-taught, but Axel had mentors. He was a wonderful family man. He just adored his wife and his two boys. He and I were very good friends.

GP: As I'm sure you know, Graham Thomas Chipperfield brought three of his own elephants over from England. Did you provide those elephants the same veterinary care that you gave to the show-owned elephants?

DH: Whether they were owned by Ringling or not, like the Kazakhstan horses, or anything, it was all the same. Their veterinary care was included in their contract, I assume. Kenneth told me, when I first went there and cut the deal, "This is the Greatest Show on Earth. I want you to make sure that all our animals get the greatest care. I want them to have a pension plan, just like my performers. I want you to take care of them, for the rest of their lives. So you give them the best." Years later he said, "If everybody ran their department like you run yours, I wouldn't have a problem. You never waste a penny, but you give them the best."

JP: Kenneth seemed to be genuinely fond of the elephants. Did he seem to have any favorites?

DH: Well you know I said, "We should breed elephants", and Kenneth said, "Ha, how are you going to do that?" I said, "We have the finest herd of elephants in the world, and we've got a male elephant; we should breed them." He said, "OK, if you can breed a couple of elephants, then I'll believe you. And I'll build a place for the elephants." So Teddy [Ted Svertesky] and I did this together, basically. It was his dream, and we got this place together in Williston. We were really good friends. When I came up with this idea, I stayed in a tent, and he had a little trailer, no phone. We didn't have a tractor. We picked up the manure with a wheel barrel. I called Kenneth and I said, "Now we're gonna have two baby elephants, we don't have a name." He said "Well you have an elephant named after my wife, Bonnie, we have Alana, and Nicole, so I want it named after Juliette." I asked, "What if it's a male?" Kenneth said, "A female will be born first, don't worry about it." So anyway, here little Juliette shows up and –

JP: Were you there when she was born?

DH: –Yes. So anyway, little Juliette is born, and I'm reaching inside to see where the feet are on the [other] elephant and Ted said, "Where for art thou Romeo?" Now I don't know if it ever occurred to either one of us about the story of Romeo and Juliet. He said that because I was looking. So when the male was born, Kenneth asked what we thought and I said, "Well, we call him Romeo." Kenneth said, "Romeo and Juliette! That's fantastic! I love it!" So that's how that happened. He liked to see how things were progressing [with the Center for Elephant Conservation] and he complimented me many times because I drew the first line on the paper and worked on it until it was completed. I oversaw all the construction, the architects, and the design. If I had to do it differently I may have designed it in a different way. It's designed after a cattle operation and you can move any elephant in there, anywhere without any personal contact. And all those gates, they all weigh a ton, and none of them are hydraulic.

JP: What was the vision for the Center for Elephant Conservation as you were moving ahead with the design? What were its original goals?

DH: The first thing we struggled with was buying a place to build it, a piece of land. One of the first places we looked at was that Siemens Corporation factory [where Feld Entertainment is presently located]. I went and looked at that with Mike Fauls and we looked at a lot of different properties. He was looking for the places and he'd ask me to go with him. When we found the place there on the green swamp, I said nobody can build around us. Other people bought lots in that green

swamp sight unseen not knowing their land wasn't buildable. We had a vision for how each male would be housed, and I wanted to design a place for their breeding area. I learned long ago that you don't want corners, so they're eight sided so they can't crowd another animal in there. I think I'm the first person to come up with the idea of the electric fence [that provided larger exercise areas]. No one had ever thought about putting up an electric fence for elephants. The first time I thought of it we were in Philadelphia, and I had the materials delivered. We put it up on fiberglass poles, straight across and I had five or six guys holding the poles and we hung up the wire in front of the elephants. Now many people do it, but I didn't know anyone else who had done it before. Living on a farm with cattle, it just made sense. I thought, let's try it. Gunther said, "You nablo, it'll never work."

JP: Tell us about the design of the CEC. How long did it take to build?

DH: A couple of years. The concept was that each male would have his own house. We would have shade in each paddock. The enclosures would be pipes that would be vertical for all the elephants. But if there would be calves, the bars would be horizontal so they wouldn't escape. The whole concept was to never have an escape. The only way an elephant could get out was if a truck would enter and unload an elephant. But an elephant could never ever escape [the facility itself]. The elephants could never get to an electrical outlet or a faucet. All the watering for the males was done remotely. Outside of the building there was a pipe. Anyone could go out there and put water in it for the elephants. We put in 20 phone lines. At that point computers weren't a big thing but I wanted to be sure that we had everything that we could. We had an observation room where you could see the elephants if you needed to. It may have been overkill, but it served us well.

GP: And they named one of the elephants after you?

DH: Yeah, that was an honor. [The elephant named "Doc" was born at the CEC on May 8, 1997.]

JP: How do the conditions at the CEC compare with the environment for elephants in the wild?

DH: They certainly live longer in captivity than in the wild, I think for a number of reasons. In the wild I think they wear their teeth down. At the CEC the vegetables and fruit come from the same company that delivers to the finest hotels in Orlando. The hay is the very best, and it is supplemented with the necessary vitamins, minerals, and proteins to balance their diets. In Southeast Asia there are monsoons, very

hot weather, and external parasites. At the CEC the elephants are protected from sunlight and inclement weather. We made a substantial effort to be sure that they would be free of parasites that elephants would commonly have in Southeast Asia. We also designed the facility for sociability and there are lots of opportunities for exercise. The elephants' feet and skin improved very quickly after they were moved to the CEC, and it's because of the amount of phosphorus in the soil, as far as I'm concerned. When we first built the CEC, we had no way to get rid of the manure. I called a guy just down the road, and we arranged with him to come and pick up the manure. He said that there was a lot of phosphorus in the soil. He claimed they were mining phosphorus on their land and had found all kinds of prehistoric elephant bones and tusks, along with sharks and fish [bones]. He said he found them all the time. I never saw them, but that's what he said. So perhaps in the early ages of the earth's history, elephants lived there.

JP: When I was on the Blue Unit, I always rode Suzan. She was very special to me. Do you remember her?

DH: I do remember Suzan. In my opinion, the best elephant was Karen and she was Axel's favorite and she was quite an elephant. She was very smart.

JP: Did you ever treat King Tusk?

DH: Did I treat King Tusk? Do you see that barn, right out there? I had him in there for seven months, Tommy. He had a really badly infected foot. I knew I had to bring him to my farm, and I thought if I didn't do that, he wouldn't survive. So it was agreed that I would [bring him here]. Jimmy Silverlake and I drove all the way from Spokane to here. Jimmy stayed up there in that trailer, for quite a length of time and it was winter. We had to build a special wall to keep Tommy warm because it was in the winter. Jimmy thought it was great being here. We came all the way from Spokane, and we had to stop at the truck stops. Every time we stopped I wanted to lay him down and treat his foot. One time we said there's a way station that's closed. Let's go in there. So we stretched him out and laid him down on his side, and I started to treat his foot. All the truckers that were going the other way would say, "There's an elephant at the way station!" It wasn't long before everybody was pulling in there to see the elephant. And we thought we were real obscure.

GP: I assume that his foot got better? Was it just antibiotics that you used to treat his foot?

DH: Yes, he got better, but no it was also cleaning it out. I had a lot of ideas about treating his feet, and I made some pellets

that were slow release antibiotics that I put up in there. I had a good formula and it was very successful.

JP: What were some of the more serious ailments that you treated elephants for?

DH: Their feet was the biggest problem. There was a tradition on the circus where they would rasp their feet, and I could never get it out of their heads. They wanted to rasp them on the outside. There isn't a person in the world that would touch a rasp on the outside of a horse's hoof. On the bottom, yes. But they [circus people] want to make them look nice and that was a real big problem. Constipation could also be a problem, and the elephants eating something at the railroad site. But elephants are very, very hearty. Eye problems, some of those kind of things. I found them to be pretty darn healthy. But we were very particular about their diets and that they had the same hay all the time. At the CEC, all that hay comes from the same place in Colorado. It is very expensive, but good quality hay. We always made sure they had good supplements, too.

JP: What were some of the unique challenges you faced in terms of treating the elephants while the shows were on the road?

DH: My life was easy when I was on the Blue show, because Sonny [Ridley], I could rely on him. He was thorough and he was an elephant guy. I had an assistant on each show and I trained them myself [in matters of elephant care].

JP: What were some unique issues specific to the elephants being on the road, as opposed to elephants being in a zoo? Ringling elephants were on different pavements, surfaces, they were working, and had to endure the weather. What were some of the related veterinarian issues that you had to deal with?

DH: Well, like the situation with bringing Tommy here in the winter and taking the elephants to Japan. When we went on the ship, we couldn't take the northern route which would have been a lot shorter, because it was too cold. So we had to go to Hawaii and take the equator straight across. The challenges on the road were the long train trips. The trip to Florida was brutal – you leave Chicago and it's 10 [degrees] above zero. [Before too long] you've got to take off your coats and start opening the windows and etcetera. That was a big challenge. That job for the stable masters and the elephant people [on the train runs] was a huge responsibility to have to make those decisions. The diet was important and it was tough to get good quality hay and I'd have to fight hard to get



Juliette was born on December 30, 1992 and named after the youngest of the three Feld sisters. Romeo followed 11 days later. The famous baby elephants were photographed in January 1993 with one of their mothers.

Richard "Doc" Houck collection

it. We had a buyer that would get it and make arrangements to get it to each venue. It would vary in quality, so sometimes the elephants would have digestive problems or they'd get diarrhea. We tried to give them the best diets, and I found that the elephants did very well. One problem – it would happen very rarely – but if for some reason I'd have an elephant that I would have to recommend that it wouldn't perform, the elephant would just go nuts. They wanted to go in there and

they didn't want to be left alone. And with Gunther it was impossible. He said, "Doc, I work, they work, don't tell me that they aren't gonna work. OK?"

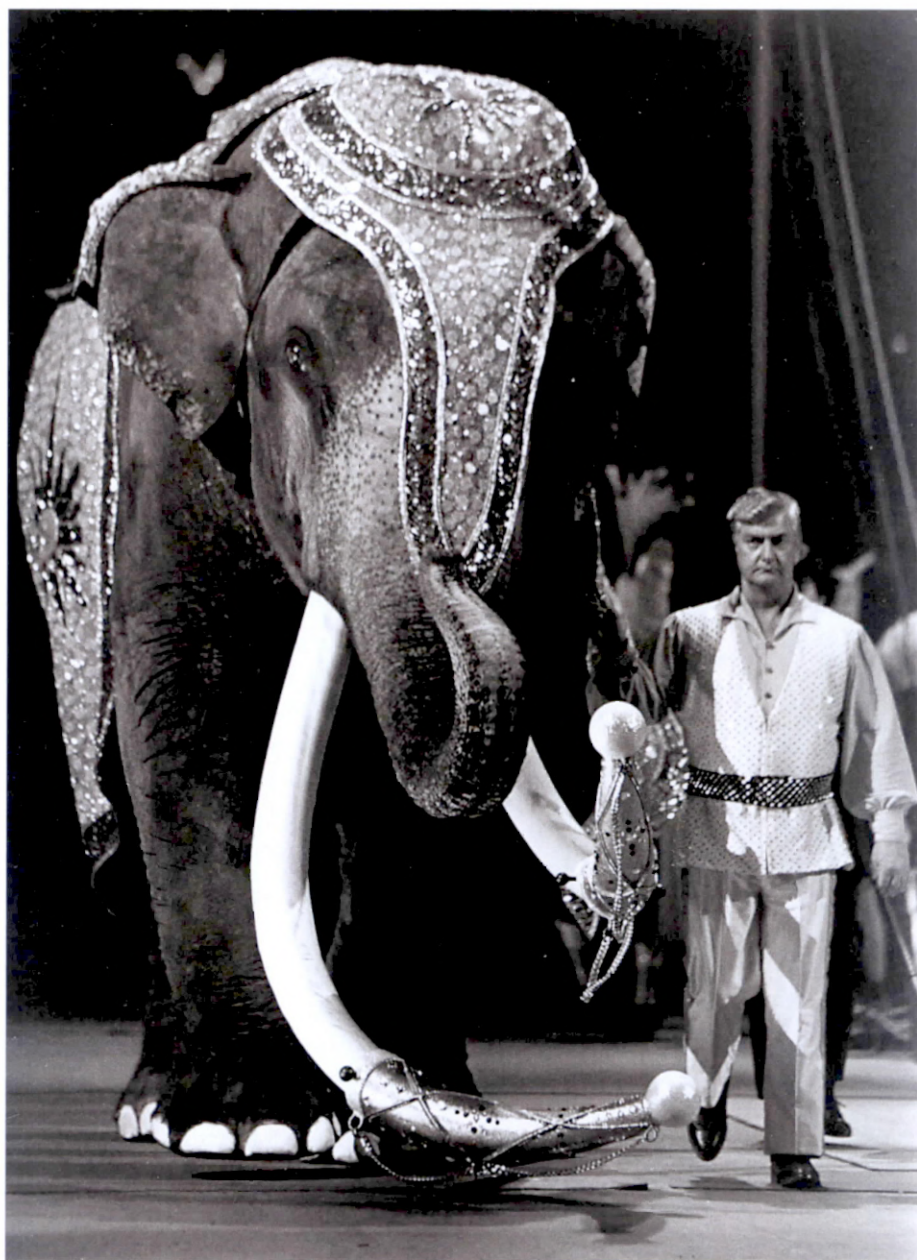
JP: Do you think the elephants and other exotic animals benefited from performing?

DH: I found that with the elephants, the exercise they got and the mental stimulation that they got in the show, was wonderful. I think it kept them happy. When we had the layoffs, they were a lot different even though there was a value in that. And as I watched those tigers, they would hear that music that preceded their act. When they heard that, they'd get up and stretch and start to walk around and that was the tip off. I'd always say, you can lead an elephant anywhere they want to go. We always worked hard to keep the elephants healthy. The pleasure of being a veterinarian on the circus was that you knew if an animal was sick, because of the trainer. They could spot it in a minute. You didn't have something that went on and on and on, and the quicker you treated it, the better off it was. Treating the eye of an elephant or a horse was very important. It wouldn't be unusual to get a flake in their eye from the hay that they throw around or something like that.

JP: Can you give an example of a recommendation that you may have made to improve the excellent care that the Ringling elephants had while you were there?

DH: One of them was the electric fence. Another was to make sure we were providing an adequate diet. The supplement of the grain and the vegetables and trying to get really good hay – that was important. And making sure they got enough water on the train trips.

On the trip to Mexico City, that was somewhat of a hassle. Some of the things that they did were tradition. Some I had to break from that. And the foot care, to make sure they were treated early. You'd have to pick that up by carefully observing them, or seeing when they were limping. As far as the dental care, there's not much you can do. And then broken tusks, and I learned how to clean those out like a root canal on a person, dog or cat. I did a lot of root canals on tigers. I



King Tusk with trainer Jimmy Silverlake.

Greg Parkinson collection

would come. 90% of them were equine veterinarians. I could only occasionally get zoo veterinarians, because many of them had it in their contract...that they could not leave the zoo. So I found that [the referral system] was very successful, and it was a great thing to have someone who could come when you needed them.

JP: How did you get started treating John Cuneo's elephants and tigers?

DH: He contacted me and said, "Do you know anything about elephants? I have an elephant with a bad foot. Would you look at it?" And that's how I started with him. And I treated that elephant just as I would have treated a horse's foot. He started to have faith in me, and I started to do more of his work. But I tell you, any veterinarian who had paid attention in school could probably have done those things.

JP: There are more than 60,000 vets across the country, but very few of them have worked with elephants. Can you comment on that fact?

DH: The thing that helped me was the fact that I went to Iowa State, studied, and vowed to be the best veterinarian.

was one of the first ones to ever do that. I made the instruments.

JP: When you were the staff veterinarian, you established a coordinated referral system across the country. Can you elaborate on that?

DH: When I first went to Ringling, it was really a hassle if I wasn't there and they had an emergency. They'd have to look in the phone book and call somebody, and then maybe no one would come out. So I came up with the idea that I would arrange with a veterinarian in each town that either I [personally] knew or had enough knowledge of that they would be successful. We would agree in advance that if the circus would call them, no matter what time of day, they

I never studied for an exam. I was a straight A student. I lived in the veterinary clinic. I worked 60 hours a week and paid for my own education. I got out of school in six years. My motive was different than my classmates. I lived in the clinic for three years and on a dairy research farm for two. So when I graduated I was qualified to be a veterinarian. I always approached it from what is wrong and how can we treat this? Many people would be afraid to treat elephants, and when I started to do the work for John Cuneo, yes, I gained experience, especially on tigers. My long suit was horses anyway. When you treat 70 elephants you are going to learn a lot. I read everything. I had the biggest collection of elephant books. I gave them all to Gary Jacobson. I got them from Smokey Jones. I bought them from him. The point is that you

gain the experience and the confidence. The elephants knew me because I did stuff with them and I gave them a treat. It was very interesting. If I was going to vaccinate all the elephants, I'd go to the first and if I was going to vaccinate or draw blood I'd have somebody bring me a bunch of carrots or a big loaf of bread and I'd do the sample and give the elephant the bread. When you had the sample done, the next elephant in line already had its mouth open. I loved working with the elephants. Somehow I could look into the elephant's eyes and we would connect. They knew me. They knew my touch. They knew who I was. I treated Tommy sometimes three times a day for months and months and it was like he said, "Boy, I feel so much better after he did that." But sometimes it would be painful to clean out his foot. But if you're able to connect... and how do you do that? I don't know. Like with Gunther, how did he do that?

GP: How long has it been since you've been to the CEC?

DH: I was there two years ago. I was going to go this year, but I haven't. Part of it is the nostalgia. Many things have passed, but that's why I want to go down there. Gary and Chico [Williams] and I really became good friends – they were all part of my life.

JP: As you reflect back on the years when you treated Ringling's elephants and helped care for the other animals no

matter where the shows were, what else stands out?

DH: Dr. Lindsey often says, "How did you do that?" I was the only veterinarian [employed by Ringling]. I did all the surgeries. I did everything. I castrated 16 elephants. I mean holy cow.

GP: Kenneth Feld once said that he didn't know if there would ever be another Gunther. A few days after Gunther died, Buckles Woodcock wrote about how Gunther was uniquely different than any of the trainers that Buckles had grown up around. He concluded by stating that he felt that we would never see Gunther's likes again. Here's the question. Do you think it's fair to say that in terms of circus veterinarians, that we will never see the likes of Doc Richard Houck again?

DH: I don't like to say that, but I don't think so. I don't think you'll ever find anybody as qualified, as dedicated, as thorough, and who was always there. You won't find anybody that will say, "I called him and I couldn't get a hold of him, or he didn't come." I was very dedicated.

GP: That's why Julie and I wanted to interview you, because that's the reputation you have had. Your reputation is as strong as it gets in your field, and that's pretty amazing.

DH: Well, thank you. I was also ethical. **BW**



Doc Houck and Gunther Gebel-Williams shared a great love of elephants and consulted regularly on the health and care of all Ringling-Barnum animals.

Richard "Doc" Houck collection

Mark Oliver Gebel *Remembers*



Mark Oliver Gebel had an extraordinary career with *The Greatest Show on Earth*. He was born in 1970 when the Ringling Red Unit was playing Houston. Raised in the circus world by his celebrated parents, Gunther Gebel-Williams and Sigrid Gebel, Mark performed for a decade with his father, mother, and sister, Tina. After Gunther retired from the circus ring, Mark directed the Ringling elephant acts for the next 14 years. He first presented the tiger act in 1996. That same year he married Romanian acrobat, Cristina Moraru. They have two sons. All told, Mark Gebel called the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Red Unit his home for 34 years. The following interview with the renowned animal trainer was conducted by Julie Parkinson on October 26, 2016 at Mark and Cristina's home in Venice, Florida.

Julie Parkinson (JP): How many elephants did your father bring from Germany and what was the largest number that he performed with while on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey?

Mark Oliver Gebel (MOG): He came over with 15. I remember my dad said once that he made that trip across the sea, which took weeks, with elephants on the ship, and he said, "I'm not doing that again" because it was like a nightmare...

Mark Gebel inherited the 21 elephants of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Red Unit herd following his father's retirement from the ring in 1990. He continued to perform with the elephants for the next 14 years.

Mark Gebel collection

on the ship with the horses, the tigers, and elephants. When I took over for my dad we had 21 elephants. I think that was the most we ever had. We could have probably had more, but that was [the limit] because they wouldn't give us more space on the train due to the budget.

JP: When you were growing up, how much did you hang out backstage with the animals?

MOG: Most of my time, I spent with the elephants. I wasn't allowed to go around the cats, because it was too dangerous. I wasn't allowed to go around the horses,

because I could get kicked. The elephants were like, "Oh the little guy's here." They respected me, and knew that I was the boss's kid. It never got boring being around the elephants. It didn't matter if I was cleaning, washing, or feeding them. Being around the elephants was pretty much my entire childhood. Assan, who will be 60 this year and until very recently was on tour, watched me grow up. We had a connection that you can't explain, a bond... Not having that anymore was the hardest thing for me when I left the show.

JP: When you were a young boy, how did you balance the extensive time you spent around the animals with other demands like going to school?

MOG: I always had school in the morning. My dad always said school first and then you can do circus and do animals. Then once I finished those things I could go do everything else. He was very adamant about learning first before I did anything else.

JP: What are your recollections about Congo, the African elephant your dad brought over with the other Circus Williams animals?

MOG: Congo was one-of-a-kind. No one had an elephant like this. She was the African elephant that the tiger rode on

her back. My father could call her from anywhere and she'd come. She worked in my dad's mixed act with tigers and the horses. He would get on Congo's back and stand on her back. No one ever had to lead her around the ring. She would stop whenever he'd tell her to. ...The relationship that my father built with the elephants – I can't even explain it to you.

JP: Were there certain elephants that your dad told you to stay away from?

MOG: Well, of course... Some were like little puppy dogs and there were some that were pit bulls. But we never had any elephants that we didn't feel comfortable with. It was great that the Felds were so supportive of us. If an animal wasn't healthy, they had a facility to send the elephants to. It was a place not just to breed them, but where they could retire and enjoy the remainder of their life in Florida.

JP: Do you think some elephants, like people, enjoyed performing more than others?

MOG: Absolutely. Each individual animal has a special personality and character, and that's what made our lives and what we did so much fun. Some of the elephants did more in the ring, and some were smarter than others, just like people. Some enjoyed performing more, and some enjoyed the attention more. You can't force an elephant to do something... You have to adapt to them and that is what made that relationship so special.

JP: Did you have an elephant that you were particularly close to?

MOG: I hear that question asked a lot, but I didn't have a favorite. I loved them all the same, just as you would love your children the same. Yes maybe you have a little closer relationship or are able to connect a bit more with one more than another. You couldn't pick a favorite because that would not be good for you or for them.

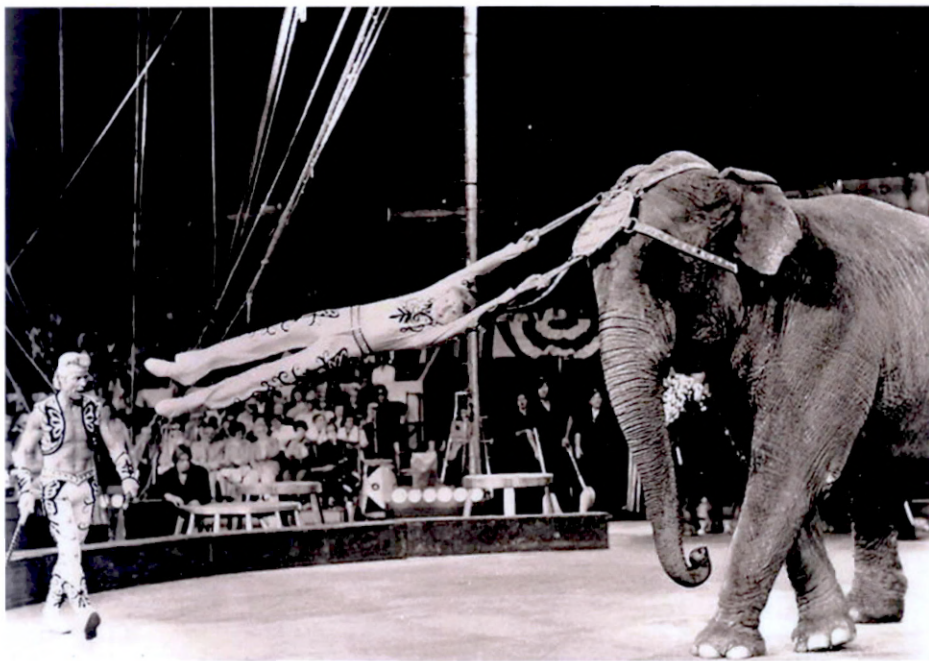
JP: What pieces of advice about the elephants did your dad give you?

MOG: I always recall my father saying, "Remember, don't talk loud, don't try to be stronger than them or try to be a tough guy, because remember, they're always going to be bigger than you." If you're always yelling at them, talking loud to them, or being hard on them, nothing will affect them. My dad always taught me to be the same person all of the time...especially with elephants because they're so smart. They don't want to see a constant changing of personality. They want you to be consistent with who you are. That will keep them on an even level. If you're angry, they feel that. If you're nervous, they will be nervous. They feed off of what we feel. Walking over bridges, going through tunnels...the way you lead them and how you come across to them – they feed off of that. I remember my father being patient, calm, and relaxed all the time, and it worked. With training you must be patient. It may take longer in the long run, but you can't



This grainy 35 mm slide recorded Mark Gebel's very first performance in "Jungle Jamboree." Mark is seen sitting on Dicky the giraffe, surrounded by two baby and two adult African elephants on tubs. Gunther Gebel-Williams, in the foreground of the ring, directed this Red Unit elephant production. The photo was taken in 1981 at the Venice Circus Arena.

Greg Parkinson
photo



Mark Gebel is seen performing with his legendary father in the mid-1980s.

Mark Gebel collection

rush the trust and bond that needs to be built between you and the animal.

JP: What was it like for you during your father's last performance in Pittsburgh?

MOG: I remember when he handed me the boots. I had tears in my eyes. I had already been performing for a long time, but now all the focus would be on me. People would ask me how it felt to fill my father's shoes. Well, first of all, they were two sizes too small...but seriously it wasn't like I had to worry about being out on my own because my dad was still there. I still had his support. He retired from performing but was still able to help me. He knew the responsibilities that came with taking care of a massive herd of 21 elephants. He was the only one who was there on a daily basis and who knew the worries and responsibilities that came with such tremendous creatures. Sometimes he would travel with Tim Holst [Ringling-Barnum Vice President of Production and Talent] to look for acts, but he was so nervous every minute he was gone, knowing what could happen. Once he came back he felt relieved. Even though it was my responsibility, it was always a great feeling to know that my dad was there. I loved performing and I loved doing what I did the last years after my father retired, but even more I enjoyed performing with my dad. I enjoyed watching him and being there for him when he was performing. It wasn't just me, the entire crew fed off of him. In doing our little parts, it made us feel good. Just mak-

ing sure everything was where it needed to be and we were all working together to make it all happen. It was something I got more satisfaction out of than actually performing.

JP: Tell me about your dad returning to the ring, after his retirement.

MOG: Mr. Feld [Kenneth] wanted return performances for some of the bigger cities like New York, Chicago, and a few other large cities where they could promote him. However, he actually only worked the tigers when he came back. I continued to present the elephants and the horses. It resulted in a great response. The only time he ever worked everything, including the elephants,

was when my son, Hunter, was born in 1998. I came down to Florida for his birth, and then Hurricane George hit. I couldn't get back to the show, so my dad ended up working the entire week which made everyone happy.

JP: King Tusk was briefly a part of your herd of elephants on the Red Unit, correct?

MOG: It was only during the last two months of the tour that we were responsible for him. Even though we hadn't spent much time with King Tusk, we took him and put him with the rest of the herd. We just asked him to do his thing and just went along with him. He was a very unique, one-of-a-kind elephant. He had his massive ivory and now you don't see anything even close to that with any other elephants. Jimmy Silverlake [the trainer who took care of King Tusk for many years and who went by Silverlake, although his real name was James Timberlake] was a very relaxed, calm individual, and that's how the elephant was too. Again, elephants kind of feed off of your temperament.

JP: You did the teeterboard routine for a period of time while your dad was still performing. What can you tell us about that act?

MOG: I never really learned very much acrobatics when I was younger, so I only did the front jump, which I did pretty high. I had to wear the safety or sometimes I'd just fly over the elephant. Nellie was the one that hit the board, and she was also one of our best elephants. I'd put her at the top of the list. She was incredible. If you see some of the videos of how my dad would command her during the teeterboard act and

say, "OK stop. OK back up." I mean it was amazing! He'd say, "OK go!" It was just explosive. When I did the teeterboard act, Tetchie was still the one we used to land on. It was so hard to learn. Nellie was coming at you and you just had to go for it! There was no way to prepare. I was so scared. I don't even want to remember it... I was like ahhh she's coming! You had to lean forward because if you were leaning a little bit the wrong way, you were going to go in the wrong direction. So lean forward a little bit and, hup! My dad would try to teach me about the timing and to be ready when you saw the foot right there! You watched her jump down [and start to run toward you] and you had very little time...and she runs.... shhhhhh---boom!

JP: When did you first become aware that your father was sick?

MOG: It was the summer of 2000 and the show was in San Antonio. I remember we were practicing one day... We went to the doctor and the doctor told me he had about one year to live. It turned out to be almost exactly one year and one week... Mr. Feld had him flown down here [to Florida] and he had the surgery. Three days later he was out here sweeping the driveway. Then, of course, he had to do the treatments. It was a tough year for my mom and my sister because I wasn't here for that year. He only came to see me [on the show] a couple of times. He would spend a week or so with me...everyone was so happy to see him. It was good.

JP: What were your thoughts when you first heard that Ringling was going to retire the elephants and take them off the traveling units?

MOG: I knew it was coming, and it was heart-breaking to know that it's not going to happen again on the Ringling show. If it wasn't for the Felds fighting for so many years to keep them, the elephants probably would've been gone a long time ago. So I have mixed emotions and a feeling of sadness. I'm going to open a book at some point, show my kids and tell them I'm in a history book, look at this. I mean literally history. You're never going to see that again. I mean ever. Look at dad with 21 elephants standing in a long mount behind him. So, I'm kind of proud of and feel lucky to have been a part of it all.

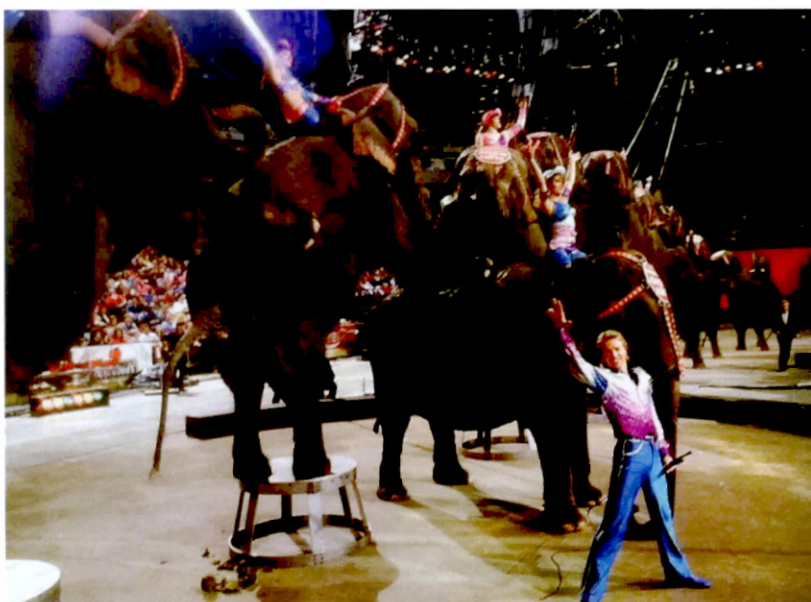
JP: Besides your father, of course, did any other trainers influence you?

MOG: Well, definitely Flavio Togni, who watched

my father as he was growing up. Before my father came to America he was with the Circo Americano Togni in Italy. My father worked with Willie who had a group of elephants. That was when my father began his experience with the elephants. Many years later, Enis and his son, Flavio, were brought to the States to try to make Flavio the next Gunther. I became very close to him, and we used to spend a lot of time together. His style and the way he works with the animals is very similar to my dad and his approach. He is very calm and compassionate with the animals and that's probably why I look up to him so much. When I'm around Flavio, it hits home for me. It reminds me of how I grew up, watching my dad. When I go to visit him, I can take my kids and we can go around the elephants. That's what we did one summer. We just took them over there [to Italy] and that is what we did every day. We worked and helped take care of the elephants. I loved every minute of it because my sons were older, and I wanted them to experience that a little bit.

JP: Looking back and reflecting on your years with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, any final thoughts?

MOG: I have always been an advocate for animals and their protection. I remember riding on the train traveling through the towns in the winter, and it would break my heart to see cows outside in the freezing cold. Listen, I eat a good steak, so don't get me wrong, but all animals need to be taken care of. I'm proud to know what I have accomplished. I've had a very rich life. When I say rich I mean a rich heritage of being around these amazing animals. **BW**



Mark Gebel performed with elephants on the Ringling-Barnum show for 24 years.
Richard "Doc" Houck collection

Elephant Memoirs



by Julie Parkinson

Looking back upon my four years as a performer with The Greatest Show on Earth, I realize that as a naïve 18-year-old I had no idea how lucky I was to work with those magnificent beasts as we traveled around the country. Nor did I have any idea of how I would look back upon those years with such fondness.

To be a performer who toured with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey wasn't just a dream of mine, it was a way for my dad to live vicariously through me. I had grown up in Baraboo, hearing the tales of the Ringling Brothers, and I began my performing career being levitated in the magic show and being sawed in half when I was 11 years old. Every subsequent summer I learned something new. Soon I had experience with aerial acts, exotic animals, the illusion show, etc. Shortly after graduating from high school,

Julie Parkinson performed with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Blue Unit from 1994-1997. She is seen in this publicity photograph with Jewel, one of the elephants captured in India and brought to Sarasota during the winter of 1953-1954. Originally named Cutie, Benjamin White changed the elephant's name to Jewel in 1956.

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,
Julie Parkinson collection

Tim Holst came to see me perform at Circus World Museum, and he determined I could easily fit into the 16-girl cord act that was performing with the Romeo and Juliette tour. He sent me a contract to perform in the aerial act, ride elephants, and dance. I signed and returned the contract although I was still underage and not yet able to join the show. On September 1, I turned 18 years old. Thirteen days later I was stepping off a plane in Sacramento, joining the Greatest Show on Earth.

The most iconic memory that I have of performing with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Blue Unit elephants dates back to a cold day on April 5, 1995 at the United States Capitol. It was nearly cherry blossom season which should have signified warmer temperatures in the nation's capital, but that day the high temperature was 22 degrees Fahrenheit, and the wind chill made it feel like just a few degrees above zero – far too

cold to be in a sleeveless costume. About 25 of us from the Blue Unit staged a 45 minute show in front of the Capitol that included several acts from the Romeo & Juliette tour.

The event was billed as a "Congressional Salute" celebrating the 125th anniversary of the circus, and House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole received honorary ringmaster awards. The outdoor show concluded with the elephants performing the long mount – twice. I remember being so cold that I could not feel my hand as it gripped my elephant, Suzan's headpiece. Ringmaster Dinny McGuire could barely announce as his lips were nearly frozen. We were absolutely miserable. However, somehow we all soldiered through with a high level of professionalism. It is a day that I now reflect upon with a sense of pride, happy that I was a part of that bit of history along with those sensational elephants.

On one of my first days on the Blue Unit, I joined other First-of-Mays in the elephant tent to practice getting up on the elephants we were assigned to and would be riding in the show. This practice had been occurring for many years, acquainting the “new girls” with the “old girls”. It was the first step in the process that led to an extraordinary bond that was created between each elephant and rider – a bond that was unique to every pair.

After performing for many months with my assigned elephant Suzan, I thought I knew exactly what to expect with the sweet girl. Each show after dancing in “menage,” I would routinely skip up to Suzan to get my “foot-up” onto the back of her neck. I’d grip her harness with one hand and wave with the other as she’d spin around, “tail up” with the elephant ahead of her, and race out of Ring 3 around by the back curtain to her spot on front track to perform the long mount. Suzan was a very sweet elephant, but she was a bit of a rough ride. It was imperative as a rider to learn the elephant’s movements as well as their personality; after all we were riding on powerful creatures! We asked ourselves questions like, “How can I use gravity and centrifugal force

to help make myself look more graceful and at ease?,” “What quirks does she have?,” and “Will she trip?”

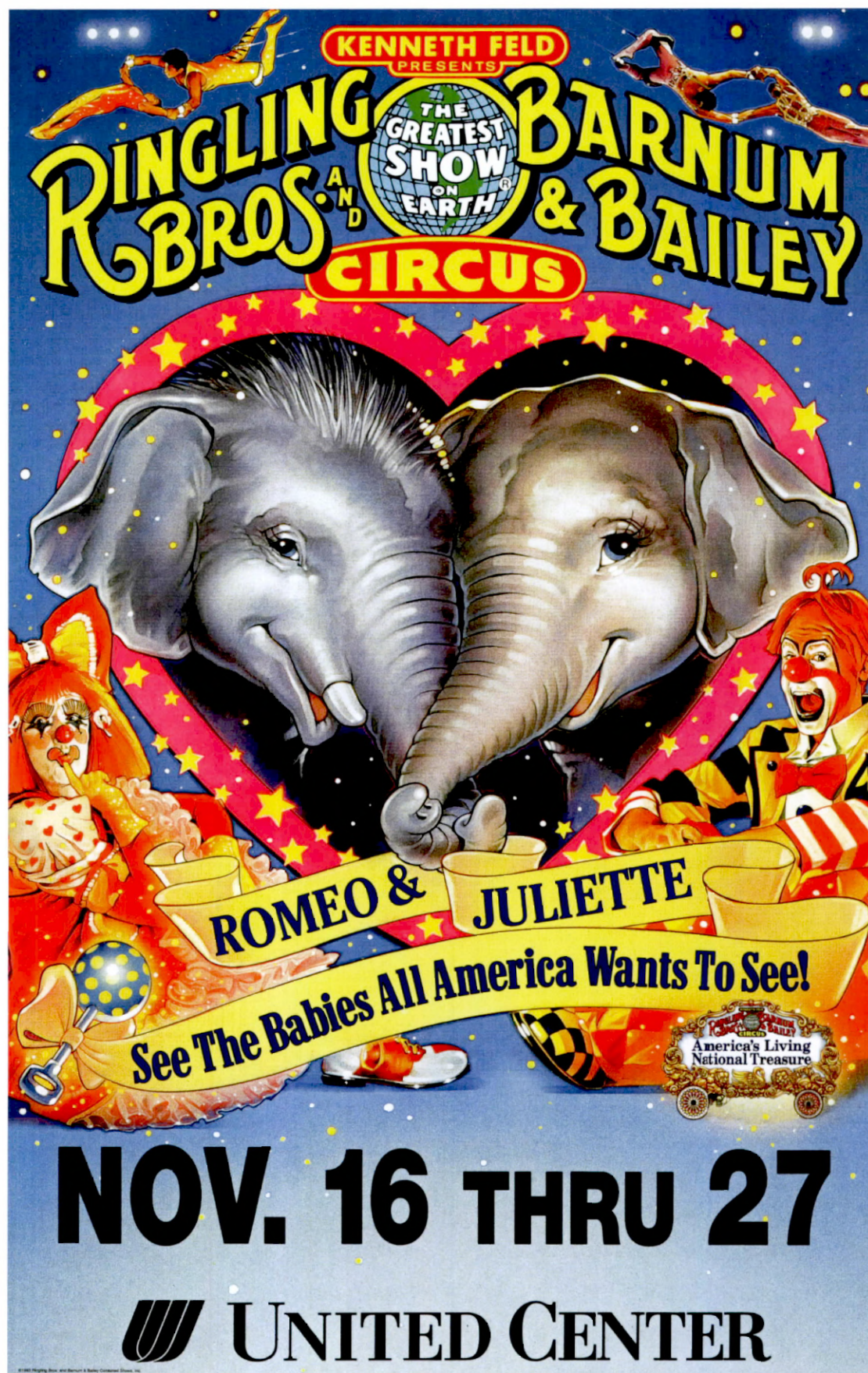
In 1994, I was told that Suzan was “about 30 years old,” but many years later I learned that she was one of the “jungle babies” that Louis Reed brought from India in the winter of 1953-1954. She was thought to have been born about 1951, so she would have already been around 43 when I joined the show. I soon learned that Suzan had a certain ritual that she would do before every long mount. She would run up to the elephant in front of her, then abruptly pause and stutter her feet a couple of steps – as if to get on the right foot – before bending her front knees and heaving herself up upon her counterpart’s back. I quickly learned that I needed to ride her down with my body almost limp and then anticipate her jumping up, so that I wouldn’t fall off. I usually had about five seconds in the long mount position to wave before she would come down, whip around, and charge out the back curtain with the other “girls.”

One show as Suzan began her ritual she took a few less tiny steps than normal. I was not ready for that – I was “riding her down” as she was jumping up. Suddenly, the



The Blue Unit elephants performed during the Special Salute to the United States Congress on April 5, 1995 commemorating the 125th anniversary of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. Julie Parkinson rode on Suzan, the third elephant from the right.

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Julie Parkinson collection



Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey poster, 22½ x 14", 1994

Julie Parkinson collection

back of her shoulder blades slammed against my body and sent me into the air and I fell off her side. Facing the back track, I was still gripping her harness with my right hand, but hanging off her side while she was up in the long mount position. My heart and mind raced, and I contemplated jumping down. However, I didn't want to scare her or break my ankles. Somehow I pulled myself up and half-way climbed back upon her shoulders just as she descended to the ground and spun around with great force. Scared to death, knowing I had probably just escaped from being trampled by several elephants, I rode her out, without my usual farewell to the audience. Needless to say, that situation could have had a much worse outcome. Never again did I assume exactly what she was going to do. I'll always wonder what Suzan was thinking in those moments.

The opening number of the Romeo & Juliette tour was a spectacular montage of acts from around the globe, including an aerial cord act with 16 girls that I performed in, complete with hula hoops and a head-first slide down the cord. The production ended dramatically with all the show's performers coming out onto the arena floor and waving their respective national flags. The aerialists, acro-

bats, animal trainers, clowns, dancers and equilibrists stretched all the way around the hippodrome track. It was an impressive representation of what the circus really was – a great melting pot of different cultures, finely choreographed together resulting in one exceptional presentation. As all 150 of us ran towards the back door to exit with our flags, the music changed and the curtain opened to a thrilling sight that still gives me chills. Out charged three elephants with Graham Thomas Chipperfield standing on the back of the last one. The band played the Doobie Brother's *Long Train Runnin'* and the trumpets blared. It was an electrifying moment that was followed by Graham's teeterboard elephant act with his three Asian elephants from England.

In the spec titled "Romeo & Juliette," I wore a one-of-a-kind cotton candy costume and danced on the oversized ring curb of the center ring while the two "babies" performed in the ring behind me. This large ring curb contained the pull-up cage for Graham's lion act, and it was sloped on the inside edge to accommodate the Cossack riding act. The costume was heavy and awkward. My greatest fear that tour was not getting hurt during one of the dangerous elements I performed, but it was falling off the ring curb with that damn (I mean beautiful) costume. This fortunately and incredibly never happened.

Incidentally, the "Babies all America wants to see" were a bit rambunctious, and for the most part the performers steered clear of them. I regret never having taken a photo with Romeo and Juliette or with King Tusk. Perhaps I didn't because I had grown up around Circus World Museum in Baraboo and being around the animals was wonderful, but not unusual to me. On the Blue Unit, it was common to see many different performers asking Jimmy Silverlake if they could sit on Tommy's tusks for a photo, but I never did. I also wish I would have hung out more in the elephant tent – in those days we could do that. Most of all, I wish I had seen Suzan one last time at the Center for Elephant Conservation.

Performing on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey those four years – I was so young and carefree – the thought never crossed my mind that there would come a time when the elephants would no longer be a part of The Greatest



Graham Thomas Chipperfield came from England in 1994 to present his elephant teeterboard act and a large group of male lions on the Ringling-Barnum Blue Unit. Chipperfield is seen here presenting the center ring elephant act in 1996.

Richard "Doc" Houck collection

Show on Earth. When I was on the show in the mid to late 1990s, I did the elephant walks every week from the train to the arena and from the arena back to the train. We often saw the activists intermingled with the crowds that lined the streets, people straining their necks to get a glimpse of the herd going through their own downtown. It never occurred to me that such an important element of the circus would cease to be a part of it. I am sad for the future generations that will not have the opportunity to witness the grand spectacle of a huge herd of elephants performing and to hear the crowd scream when the elephants charge into the arena! That memory almost brings a tear to my eye. All of these memories of the elephants will now only live on in history and our hearts. **Bw**



THE BARNUM & BAILEY GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH



THE MIRTHFUL MIDGETS' FUNNY FEAST.

THE QUADRILLE ELEPHANTS
"FIRST FOUR FORWARD & BACK"

MILITARY DRILL AND MIGHTY PYRAMIDS.

24 MONSTER AND BABY PERFORMING ELEPHANTS
3 HERDS IN 3 RINGS. ALL AT ONE TIME.

"HE'S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW"

THE WORLD'S LARGEST, GRANDEST, BEST AMUSEMENT INSTITUTION.

The Greatest Pachyderms on Earth

Prodigious Posters of Extraordinary Elephants
1871-1918

by Chris Berry

In the very early days of the American circus and menagerie, advertising was crude and the appearance of an elephant anywhere in the United States was a momentous occasion. Although the first elephant arrived on the shores about 1800, over the next 50 years only a handful of them were found in North America, until the showman P. T. Barnum imported a herd of ten elephants in 1850. That event, like so many of Barnum's stunts, was unlike anything ever seen. After the elephants were unloaded from their ship they were harnessed and paraded up Broadway to the Irving House hotel where Jenny Lind was staying. While these elephants weren't trained as performers, the herd did become a featured attraction in the menagerie of Barnum's Great Asiatic Caravan, Museum and Menagerie.¹

A few years later seven of these elephants were auctioned off along with other animals that had been a part of the traveling zoo. The wild animal collection was owned by Barnum and Seth B. Howes along with Strattan and Avery Smith, and while the auction ended their partnership, seven of the elephants were sold to Howes for \$2,300, a bargain since it had cost \$3,000 each to import them from Ceylon.²

Barnum, always the showman, kept one of the elephants, and placed it on a six-acre field in Bridgeport, adjacent to the New York and New Haven Railroad. The elephant keeper, who Barnum said was "dressed in an Ori-

ental costume," would wait for a train to approach and when he saw smoke on the horizon start plowing the field, with the elephant instead of a horse pulling the plow. Passengers reported what they had seen and the story became an international sensation, with articles appearing in newspapers and magazines all over the world. Barnum said the six acres were plowed at least sixty times before he determined the story had played out and he sold the elephant to Van Amburgh's Menagerie.³

When Barnum was coaxed back into the circus business, elephants were a part of the show, but the big herds associated with the large rail shows were still to come. At the start of the 1872 season, P. T. Barnum's Great Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan and Hippodrome Combined with Dan Castello's Circus, featured one Asian elephant and her calf, while the Sells Brothers Mammoth Quadruple Alliance Museum, Menagerie, Caravan and Circus only carried one elephant. Several other circuses carried a single elephant, Adam Forepaugh had two, and Van Amburgh & Co.'s Great Golden Menagerie carried three.⁴

In 1880 the "circus elephant wars" began. It can safely be said that Cooper Bailey & Co., owned by James E. Cooper and James A. Bailey, is a part of the historical lineage of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, as this was the show that Bailey operated prior to partnering with P. T. Barnum in 1881. Whether it was an elephant that brought the two together or just the right business climate, no one can dispute the impact that an elephant named Columbia had on the circus world.

Strobridge Lithographing Company, one sheet, 1896.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



Strobridge Lithographing Company, half sheet, 1880.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

In the spring of 1879 came word that an elephant owned by Cooper and Bailey was pregnant. This was big news across the country, as no elephant had been born in the United States and survived, and most veterinarians of the time didn't believe that an elephant could be born in captivity.⁵ On March 10, 1880 at Cooper and Bailey's winter quarters in Philadelphia, the baby elephant was born. The calf survived and the nation was buzzing with news of the birth of this extraordinary baby named Columbia. New lithographs were ordered and throughout the season thousands turned out daily to see the circus and the new elephant, the first born in the United States, and possibly the first ever born in captivity.⁶

Barnum, realizing the business potential of owning a baby elephant, immediately sent a telegram to Bailey that he would like to purchase Columbia for \$100,000. Not only did Bailey refuse to sell, but he then created advertising that reproduced Barnum's telegram with the headline "This is what Barnum thinks of Cooper & Bailey's Baby Elephant."⁷ Obviously the old Humbug didn't take it personally, as that

summer Barnum, Bailey and James Hutchinson agreed that a partnership made more sense than competing, and by the end of 1880 they had merged their shows into one circus, P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth & The Great London Circus Combined with Sanger's Royal British Menagerie & Grand International Allied Shows.⁸

In February, 1882 a second baby elephant was born, this time at the combined circus winter quarters in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Originally known as America, the baby elephant was renamed Bridgeport by Barnum himself, and that season Barnum & London exhibited the two calves along with a herd of two dozen elephants.⁹ This Strobridge one-sheet lithograph shows not only the activities of the baby, but also provides information on the birth of the calf, the special railway car used to transport the elephants, and other details related to the events in Bridgeport that winter.

Strobridge Lithographing Company, one sheet, 1882.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

P.T. BARNUM'S GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH, & THE GREAT LONDON CIRCUS COMBINED WITH

THE BABY'S FIRST MEAL
THE \$300,000 ELEPHANT BABY
AN ACTUAL SCENE 2 HOURS AFTER THE BIRTH.

THE BABY ELEPHANT'S ROYAL PALACE COACH + "BRIDGEPORT"

THE BABY ELEPHANT AS PLAYFUL & MISCHIEVOUS AS A KITTEN.
A SCENE FROM PHOTOGRAPH APTLY CALLED THE ELEPHANT KISS.

THE BABY KISSING MOTHER

A TRUANT CAUGHT.
A BIG SUCKING BABY, SO VALUABLE THAT \$52,000 WAS PAID FOR A LIFE INSURANCE POLICY OF \$300,000 FOR ONE YEAR.

MOTHER & BABY AT PLAY
PRESENT AT THE BIRTH OR SOON AFTERWARD, 80 EMINENT SCIENTISTS & DOCTORS FROM THE PRINCIPAL ACADEMIES & COLLEGES OF THE U.S.

A CAREFUL MOTHER.
"DON'T HURT MY BABY"
THE AFFECTION OF THIS COLOSSAL PARENT FOR HER BONANZA BABY SURPASSES EVEN A HUMAN MOTHER'S DEVOTION. THEY ARE INDEED A HAPPY ELEPHANT FAMILY.

THE SECOND BABY-ELEPHANT EVER BORN IN CAPTIVITY, AT BRIDGEPORT, AT THE WINTER QUARTERS, FEB. 2ND 1882, WEIGHED 145 POUNDS, HEIGHT 30 INCHES & LENGTH 36. TRUNK & TAIL EACH 7 INCHES. PERIOD OF GESTATION ABOUT 20 MONTHS, STOOD ON ITS FEET IN 30 MINUTES & NURSED THE MOTHER'S BREASTS IN 2 HOURS.

WINTER QUARTERS ELEPHANT HOUSE
P.T. BARNUM'S GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH, & THE GREAT LONDON CIRCUS.

SANGER'S ROYAL BRITISH MENAGERIE & GRAND INTERNATIONAL ALLIED SHOWS.

* LAST TOUR IN AMERICA. VISITS EUROPE NEXT YEAR. * BARNUM, BAILEY & HUTCHINSON, SOLE OWNERS. * DAILY EXPENSES \$ 4,800.00 REPRESENTING \$ 3,000,000.00 *

**P.T. BARNUM'S GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH.
& THE GREAT LONDON CIRCUS COMBINED WITH**

**Oh, That Precious
BABY ELEPHANT!**

From every corner of the globe, and every
afternoon.

**SO NOTED
Scientists AND Savants**

From every academy, school, college, of the young
country, and the most distinguished of the New York
country.

Over 100 Columns of
COMMENT

The Period of Gestation is
20 MONTHS

The Baby was nursing smoothly, and began to
eat and walk at the age of 300 days.

NURSED IN 2 HOURS AFTER BIRTH.

The Elephant mother is the only a female born on Earth
whose genital organs are between the fore and hind legs.
The baby comes with the mouth and feet with the head as high
by nature.

From E. C. Cooper, 1215, West 4th St., Philadelphia, Pa.
Philadelphia.

\$100,000 for the Baby.

to have 100,000 and
to have 100,000.

\$300,000.

The premium being \$100,000 and the
baby being a male of \$200,000 to have 100,000.

FATHER, MOTHER, & BABY
will be exhibited together with the first
Thousand additional specimens, with
and extra charges, &c.

HAPPY & CONTENTED BABY ELEPHANT FAMILY



**THE WONDERFUL
BONANZA BABY!**

Born at Bonanza, Conn., in our Winter
Quarters, Feb. 2, 1882, at 10 o'clock P. M.

**THE SECOND
Baby Elephant Ever Born in Captivity**

The first is now 10 years old and weighs 1,000
pounds, and is now in the show.

**Stupendous and Novel
CONSOLIDATION**

The mother, Queen, at 20 years old, weighs
10,000 pounds, and is valued at \$100,000. She
was born at P. T. Barnum's and J. L. Hutchinson's
premises, and is now in the show.

Complete Journey Around the World
in 1870, '71 and '72. She was a principal
attraction with the

International Allied Shows
and appeared before royal societies and large
audiences in New Zealand, London, Liverpool,
Paris, India, and the Exposition of Paris, Boston,
Chicago, Liverpool, London and other places,
in New York December 10th, 1878.

**THE FATHER IS
CHIEFTAIN.**
WEIGHT, 8,000 POUNDS.
and of the London Circus, head of
Asian Elephants. The

**BABY HAS BEEN NAMED
BRIDGEPORT**
In honor of Hon. P. T. Barnum and his
family.

Its weight was 140 pounds, height 80
inches, length 8 feet 6 in.

TRUNK & TAIL
each 7 inches long.
The color is a pinkish brown, with a
black, and depends on

Playful and Mischievous.

SANGER'S ROYAL BRITISH MENAGERIE & GRAND INTERNATIONAL ALLIED SHOWS
* LAST TOUR IN AMERICA * VISITS EUROPE NEXT YEAR * **BARNUM BAILEY & HUTCHINSON SOLE OWNERS.** * DAILY EXPENSES \$5,000 *
* REPRESENTING \$100,000,000 *

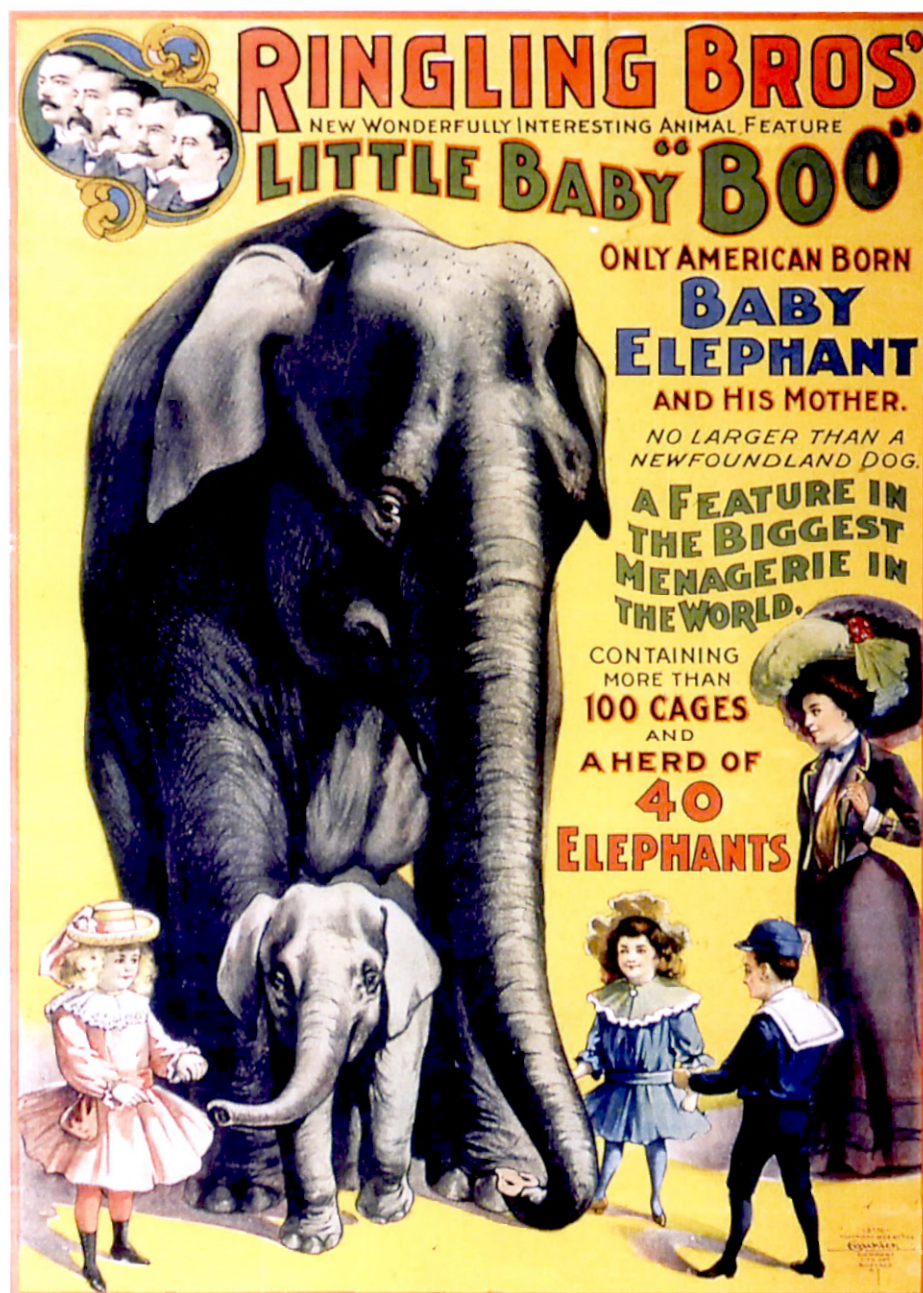
Strobridge Lithographing
Company, one sheet, 1882.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

This image of Bridgeport and her mother Queen was also reproduced on the Barnum & London program of 1882. The baby elephant was born on the evening of February 2, 1882 and Barnum himself was on hand.¹⁰ According to the *New York Times*, "Mr. Barnum was quickly summoned from his home. He shook the hands of all the attendants and was as lively as the liveliest young man, although nearly 71 years of age."¹¹ Unfortunately the baby elephant died when she was four years old while the show was playing Madison Square Garden in April of 1886.¹² The elephant's hide was stuffed and the remains were sent to the collection at the Barnum Museum in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where

it still can be found today.¹³

The birth and exploitation of baby elephants drew an audience for the Bailey and Barnum operated circuses of the 1880s, and at the dawn of the new century it looked as though history was going to repeat itself, this time with the Ringling Bros. On November 19, 1900 the first baby elephant was born to the Ringling herd, christened Baby Nick by the Governor of Wisconsin.¹⁴ While Baby Nick would have attracted considerable press and attention, he died before the show returned to the road in 1901, a scenario that unfortunately played out a year later when his mother Alice again gave birth, only to kill the unnamed baby elephant in



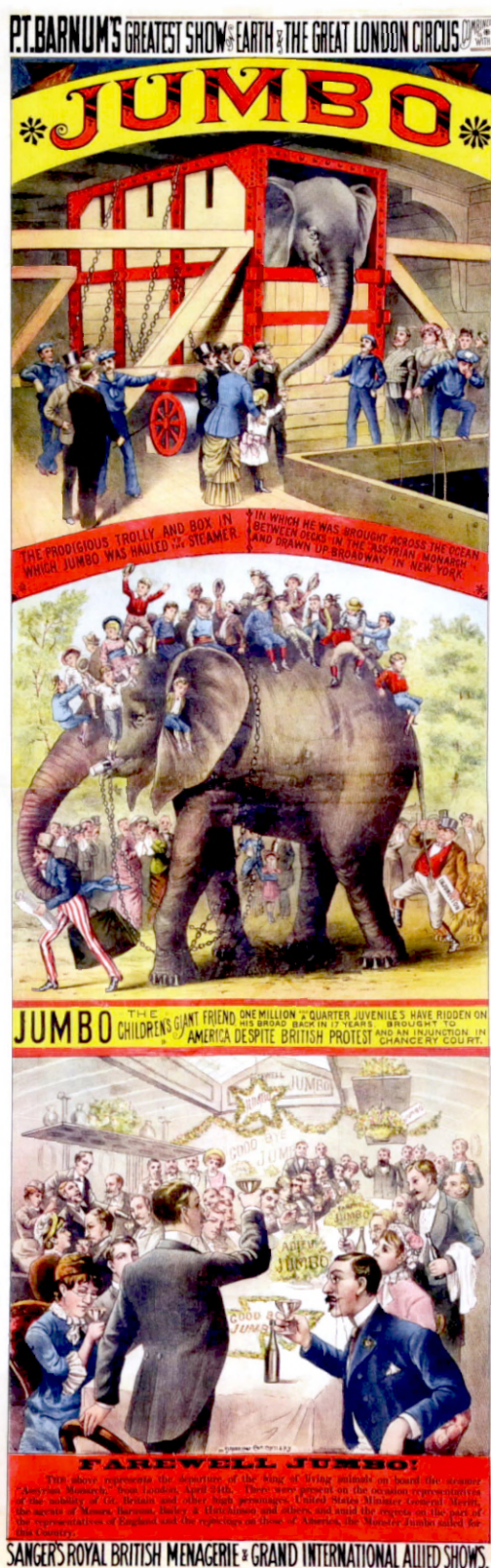
Courier Company, one sheet, 1903.

Hertzberg Circus Collection,
Witte Museum, San Antonio, Texas

October 1902.¹⁵

What happened next was straight out of P. T. Barnum's playbook. With The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth returning to the United States after touring Europe, the Ringlings moved quickly and purchased a baby elephant and her mother from the animal dealer Carl Hagenbeck. With a little public relations sleight of hand, the American public was informed that an elephant that had been born in Baraboo over the winter, and had been christened Baby Baraboo – or Baby Boo for short. The Ringlings now had a major attraction to promote at the start of the 1903 season!

Baby Boo was an instant sensation. As evidence, band-master Fred Jewell composed a fast-paced circus tune titled "Baby Boo March" which was no doubt included in the musical repertoire of the World's Greatest Shows during the early 20th Century.¹⁶ But fame is short-lived, and in 1911 Baby Boo was sold to William P. Hall, who leased the elephant to a number of shows over the next two decades. The elephant was sold to the new Cole Bros. show in 1935, and two years later she was transferred to the San Diego Zoo. Baby Boo was euthanized in January 1939 after attacking a worker at the zoo.¹⁷



Strobridge Lithographing Company, two sheet, 1882.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

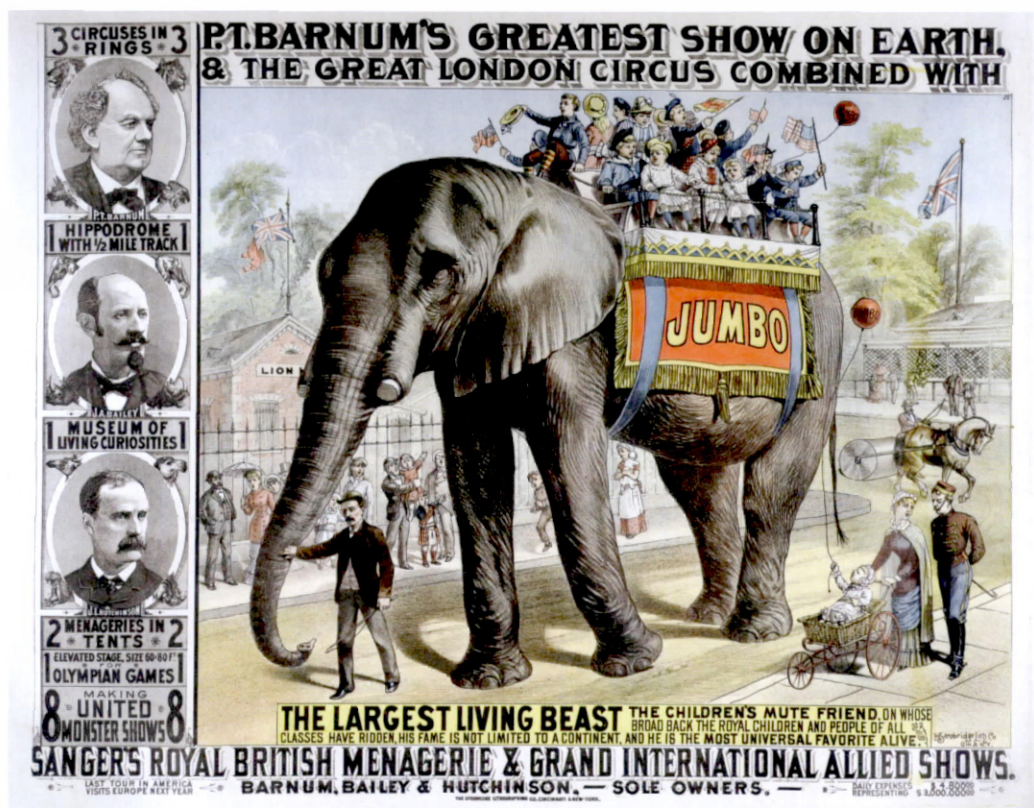
If the promotion of baby elephants wasn't enough to stimulate the minds of the American public, another feature arrived just a few months after the birth of Bridgeport in 1882. It was so enormous that even today his name is part of our lexicon, used to describe everything from shrimp to mortgage loans. Jumbo is arguably the most famous elephant in history, yet he was only exhibited for four years before being struck by a train in St. Thomas Ontario on September 15, 1885. The striking lithograph here details the transfer of Jumbo from the London Zoological Gardens, along with the adoration that those in Great Britain had for the huge elephant.

In 1881 Barnum began negotiations to purchase Jumbo from the London Zoo and he immediately faced opposition. Jumbo had been a major attraction in London for about 15 years, and had given rides to thousands of children including the Prince of Wales, a young Winston Churchill and royal offspring from across Europe.¹⁸ It was no wonder that the people of the Great Britain became outraged when they heard that he had been sold to Barnum and would be immigrating to America. Despite protests, fundraisers and lawsuits, Barnum prevailed and on March 24, 1882 Jumbo and his trainer Matthew Scott left for America. Less than a month later, on April 10, he was displayed for the first time at Madison Square Garden.¹⁹

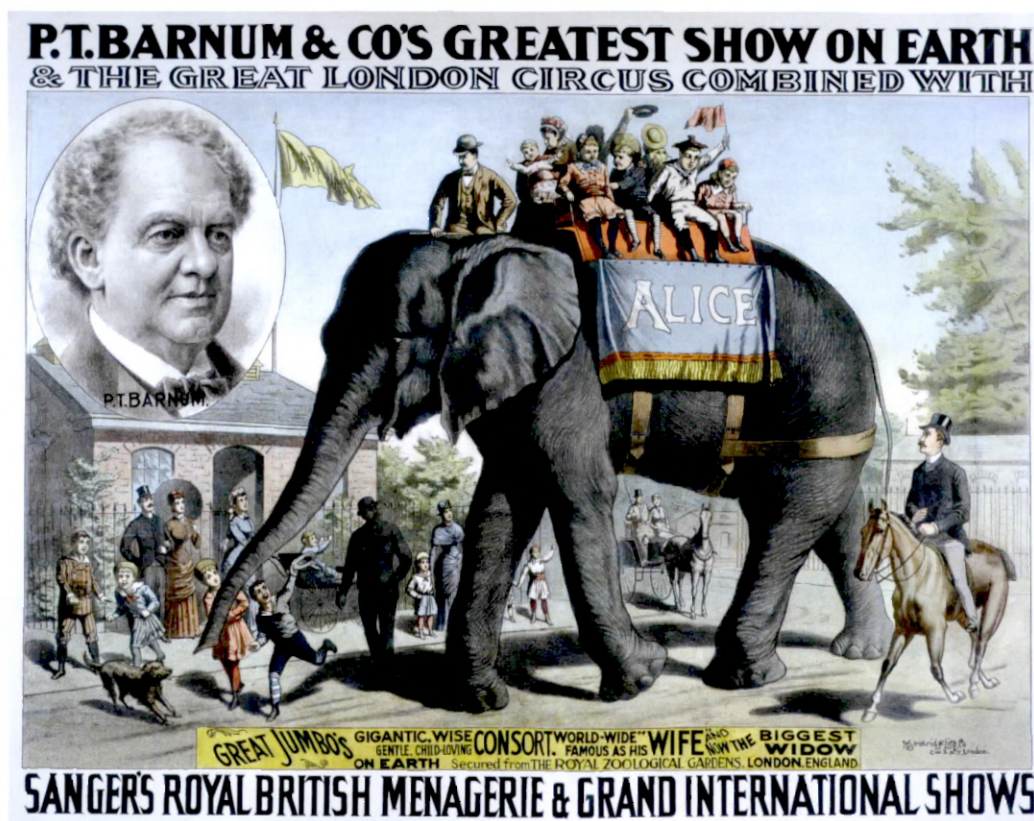
After Jumbo's death in 1885, Barnum had his hide stuffed and his skeleton mounted. The next year Barnum purchased a female elephant named Alice from the London Zoological Garden. She had been on display with Jumbo and for that reason she was promoted as the great elephant's widow. To demonstrate the magnitude of this story on both sides of the Atlantic, prior to Alice's departure she was visited at the Zoo by Queen Victoria who "bade her elephantine majesty an affectionate adieu."²⁰ The arrival of Alice in New York was preceded by a dinner and party for the New York press corps hosted by an early master of media manipulation, Tody Hamilton.

Whether it was the excitement of the "widow's" arrival, or more likely Hamilton's encouragement, the press was gushing. After arriving in New York, Alice was taken to Madison Square Garden on April 17, 1886 where the *Times* described a dramatic scene at the end of a long story that told of Alice's arrival in the United States:

"When Alice first saw the stuffed skin of Jumbo she seemed like one in a trance. Then she touched his skin with her trunk and again burst into a flood of tears. She knew at last that he was dead, and as she looked into his glassy eyes and fondled his stuffed forehead she seemed to say: 'My poor Jumbo, your Alice weeps for you.'"²

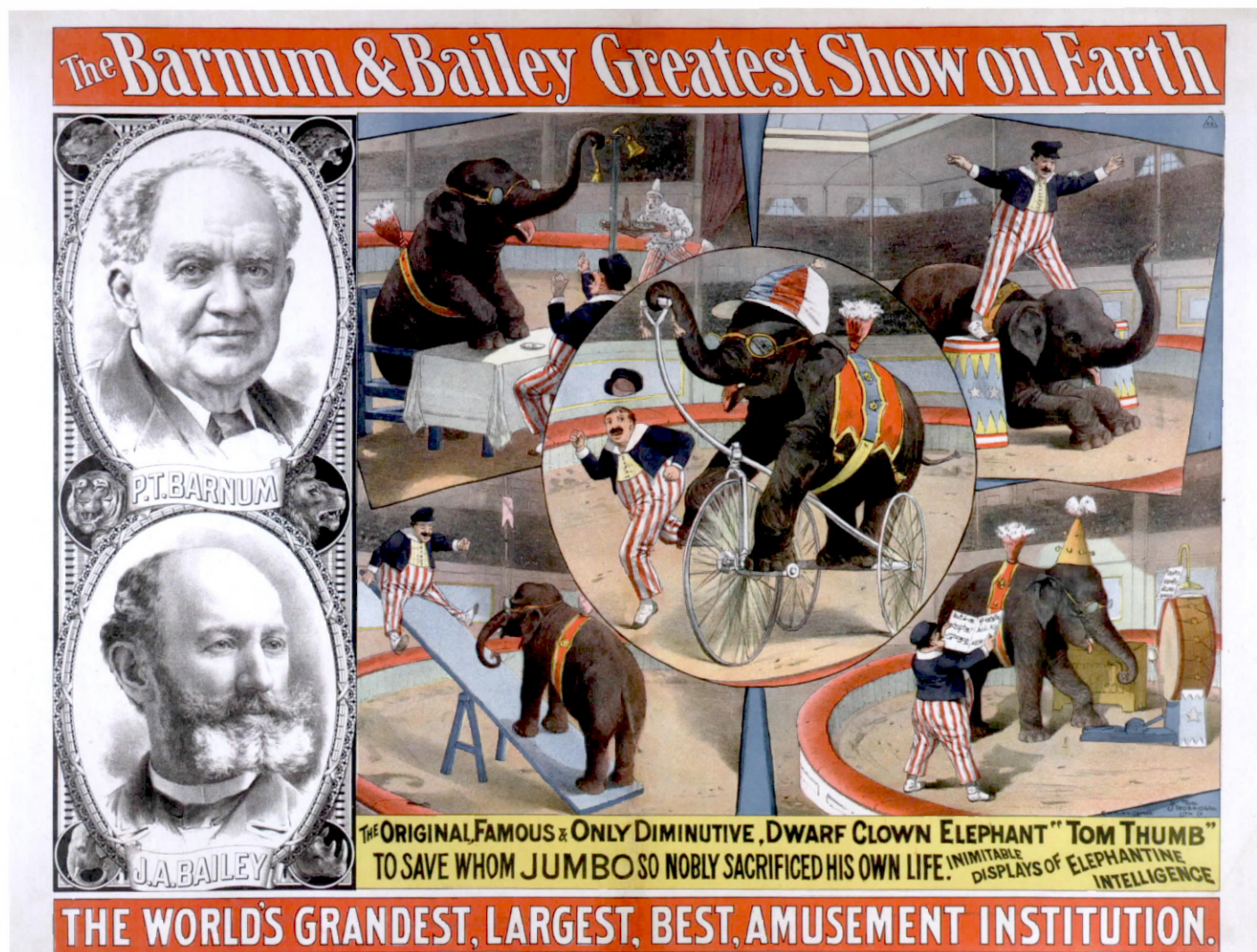


Strobridge Lithographing Company, one sheet, 1883. The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



Strobridge Lithographing Company, one sheet, 1888.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



Strobridge Lithographing Company, one sheet, 1890.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Just as the *New York Times* gave Alice the characteristics of a grief-stricken widow, there is something about elephants that makes them anthropomorphic. Whether it is their intelligence or the way they interact with people, we often view elephants as having human attributes. It is no wonder then that for generations they have been trained to act in comedy roles, such as the "Original Dwarf Clown Elephant 'Tom Thumb.'"

Part of the legend surrounding the death of Jumbo in 1885 was a story that he stepped in front of the train to save a small "clown elephant" named Tom Thumb, and it is true that the small elephant was also hit by the train and injured.²² The story of Jumbo sacrificing his own life for the small elephant grew, in great measure because of the work of Barnum's press agent Tody Hamilton, and by 1890 the story was a part of American circus lore. This one sheet lithograph reinforces the story of Jumbo's heroism and em-

phasizes the intelligence of the elephant performer.

Although Big Bingo never achieved the same notoriety as Jumbo had 30 years before, the elephant previously known as Jennie was clearly the largest of the 41 elephants in the Ringling herd when this lithograph was produced in 1915.²³ Just as Jumbo, died after a performance near the rail yards, Big Bingo succumbed at the end of a long day in Columbus, Ohio May 17, 1918.

While the actual cause of her death is unknown, a contemporary account of her day in Columbus, Ohio, May 17, 1918 details her activities, which included an "...unusually long haul from circus cars to show rounds, parade, two performances and the return haul to the cars was too exhausting and she sank on the pavement and street car tracks where her huge form delayed car traffic for three hours. Since the death of her mate about one year ago, the circus management stated, she grieved sullenly and alone,

refusing to associate with the other elephants and proving useless as a performer after her bereavement – a convincing proof that the same impulses that prevail in the human heart are felt in this species of the pachyderm.”²⁴

The skull of Big Bingo was donated to the Columbus Dental Society, along with a letter to the society dated June 12, 1918 which tells the history of what was one of the largest elephants ever exhibited in the United States:

The name of the elephant was Jennie, but at various times she was called by other names. While with one show she was called “Queen,” and more recently “Big Bingo.”

Jennie was imported from Colombo, Ceylon in 1879 together with a male mate called Baldie. At that time she was about 26 years old. She, together with Baldie, was purchased by Burr Robbins, who was then conducting a prominent circus with winter quarters at Janesville, Wis., remaining with this show until about 1890, when this pair of elephants was purchased by Mr. [W. B.] Reynolds of Rockford, Ill. for a small circus he was operating.

During the years that Jennie was with the Burr Robbins show, she was trained in various performances, presenting an act of merit with her companion Baldie. She also was trained in hauling heavy loads in harness, and in pushing heavy wagons, in which she was especially good, owing to her immense size and strength.

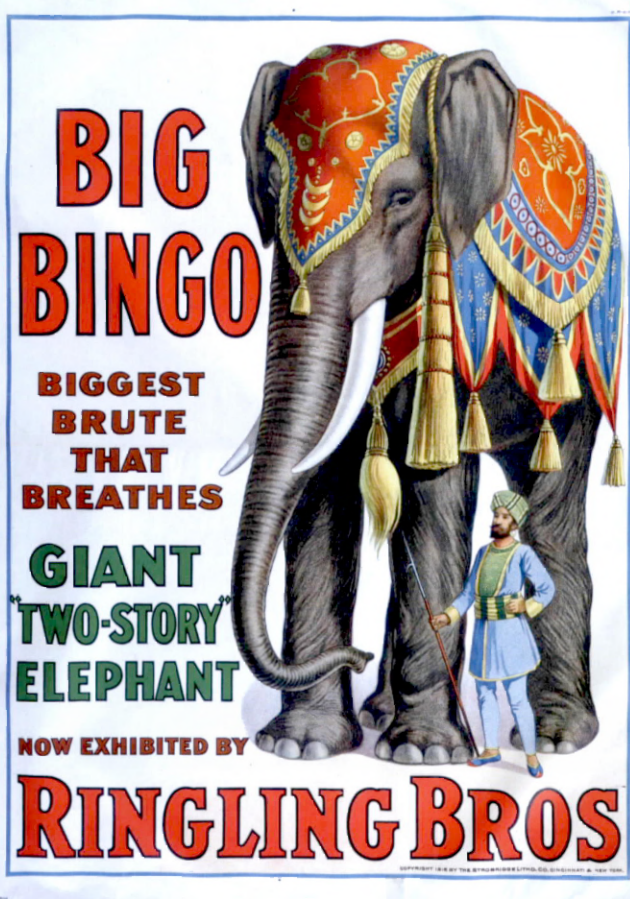
In 1895, Ringling Brothers purchased Jennie and Baldie from Mr. Reynolds and the pair has since been with Ringling Brothers. About one year ago Baldie died and since that time Jennie rapidly failed until she died in Columbus, May 17th.

Yours very truly,
Chas. Ringling²⁵



Strobridge Lithographing Company, half sheet, 1915.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



Strobridge Lithographing Company, one sheet, 1916.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

P.T. BARNUM'S GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH, THE GREAT LONDON CIRCUS,
TRAVELING THIS SEASON ONLY **UNITED** ACTUAL EXPENSES DAILY \$4,500.00.



SANGER'S ROYAL BRITISH MENAGERIE AND GRAND INTERNATIONAL ALLIED SHOWS.
A COMBINATION OF THE 4 LARGEST SHOWS. P.T. BARNUM, J.A. BAILEY & J.L. HUTCHINSON. SOLE OWNERS. A CONSOLIDATION OF THE 4 BEST SHOWS.

Strobridge Lithographing Company, one sheet, 1881.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Although P. T. Barnum had owned elephants as early as the 1850s, large herds weren't carried on American circuses until decades later. The advent of rail travel made it easier to transport the larger numbers and the introduction of trained elephants performing in three rings made bigger herds more viable. Competition with other circuses was always a factor, and an elephant that could put up the tents, perform in the show, and be exhibited in the menagerie was a triple threat.

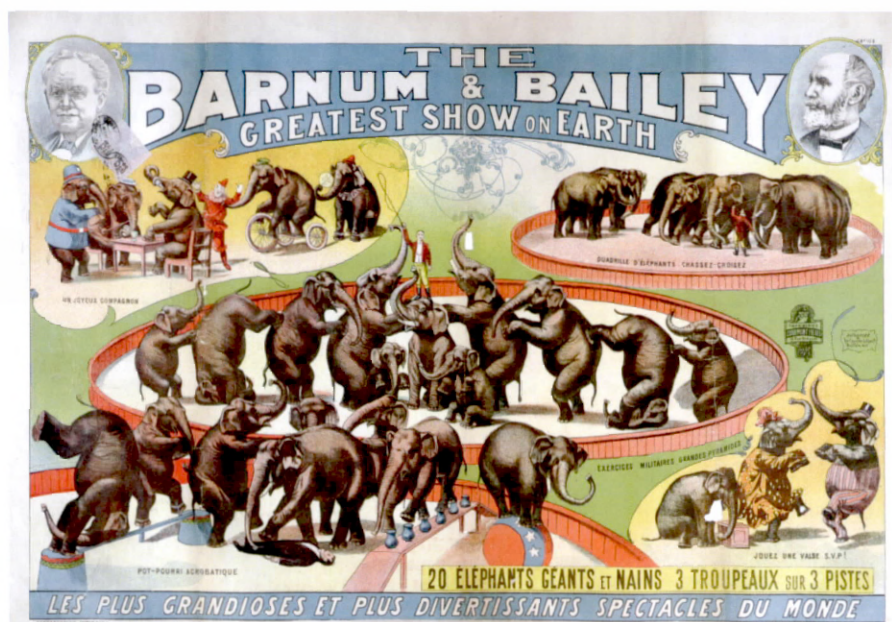
In 1881 P. T. Barnum and James Bailey combined their circuses and as a result they now promised to present "The Greatest Number of Elephants Ever Exhibited at One Time," a statement that was almost certainly true even in an era where circus advertising was punctuated by exaggeration and hyperbole. According to the *Barnum & London Route Book* of 1881, on September 21, 1881 William

Batchellor and Frank Gardiner presented "the highest and greatest double-somersaults ever done in the world; over 18 elephants..."²⁶

When the poster at the top right was produced in 1902, James A. Bailey was at the top of the circus world. P. T. Barnum passed away the previous spring and Adam Forepaugh had been dead for two years. The only real threat came from the Sells Bros, and maybe the boys from Baraboo, who had acquired a couple of elephants in 1888. Whether it was to demonstrate the magnitude of the Barnum & Bailey performance or to reinforce the dominance in the category of elephant ownership, the shows posters of the last decade of the 19th century deliver both.

From December of 1897 until October of 1902, *The Greatest Show on Earth* toured Europe. From Cardiff to Stuttgart to Budapest and Zurich, the people of the Old

Courmont Freres, one sheet, 1902.
The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



World were treated to a three ring extravaganza unlike anything that had ever visited their villages and cities. Included on the train that unloaded each morning were “20 Elephants Geants et Nains 3 Troupeaux Sur 3 Pistes” [20 Elephant Giants and Dwarves – Three Herds on Three Tracks]. Although circuses had traveled throughout Europe for decades, it was the magnitude of this show that gave it the impact and no doubt it was the elephants that left an impression. This lithograph, produced by the Paris firm of Courmont Freres, is typical of the posters used during the 1902 tour of France. Most of the text is in French, yet *The Greatest Show on Earth* is printed in English.

As James A. Bailey toured the continent, the five brothers from Wisconsin were quickly gaining a foothold with

their *World's Greatest Shows*. When the Ringlings started their show in the early 1880s, elephants were an expensive undertaking for a small wagon show and there still weren't that many elephants in North America. The brothers didn't acquire their first elephants until 1888, four years after they had started their circus. However they made up for it in very short order, and in the years that followed the herd grew exponentially. By the 1908 season, just 20 years later, the herd had grown from two to 40 elephants.²⁷

This half sheet, produced by Strobridge in 1914, demonstrates how poster advertising had evolved in just a few years. By today's standards the text on the posters of the 1880s was loquacious and verbose compared to this lithograph which shows a simple scene, and simple wording, yet the message is the same. The elephants are coming!



Strobridge Lithographing Company, half sheet, 1914.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

THE BARNUM & BAILEY GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH ENTIRELY NEW LARGER AND BETTER THAN EVER BEFORE.

P.T. BARNUM

J.A. BAILEY

"SALUTE YOUR PARTNERS"

"FIRST FOUR FORWARD AND BACK"

"WALTZ WITH YOUR PARTNERS"

"FIRST FOUR CROSS OVER"

"PROMENADE ALL"

THE BIGGEST & WISEST HERD OF DANCING TRICK ELEPHANTS

EXECUTING A BALL-ROOM QUADRILLE. = AN AMAZING & STUPENDOUS NOVELTY.

DAILY EXPENSES \$6,800.

15 NEW UNITED SHOWS

CAPITAL INVESTED \$3,000,000.

Strobridge Lithographing Company, one sheet, 1889.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Whether elephants never forget or whether they actually weep when they see one of their "friends" who has passed to the great beyond will always remain a mystery, yet we know for certain they can be trained to perform intricate routines that amuse and entertain.

Individually or as a group these massive beasts amaze us with their ability to respond to voice commands with a gentleness that is in contrast to their size and strength. In both Africa and Asia elephants have been trained for centuries to perform super-human tasks. In more recent times they have been trained to perform and entertain, and by doing so have provided audiences with some of the most memorable moments at the circus.

The above lithograph from 1889 describes "The Biggest and Wisest Herd of Dancing Trick Elephants" and promises that they will execute "a ballroom quadrille." The image and text show the dance, one closely related to square

dancing! The folk dance was very popular throughout the United States in the late 19th Century, and no doubt just as at the Grange Hall or the local fraternal lodge, there was a "caller" giving direction on when to "promenade" or "waltz with your partner."

Great elephant acts require great elephant trainers, and in the 1890s Samuel and George Lockhart were among the very best. The lithograph at upper right was produced by Courier about 1899 to promote George Lockhart's "Elephant Brass Band."

The 1898 Ringling Bros. Route Book was effusive in its description of Display #10:

Pachyderm prodigies that play musical instruments, waltz, form groups and pyramids, and perform all functions of humanity except speech. The herd includes dancing, acting, musical elephant comedians, presenting beyond all question the greatest and most astonishing examples of

elephantine sagacity ever known. Reasoning power seems distinctly proven, and their capacity to think and act with humanlike alacrity is manifestly apparent. Introduce and performed by their trainer, Prof. Lockhart.²⁸

When the poster at lower right was printed in 1909 the five Ringling Bros. had solidified their position as the Circus Kings and as "Elephant Kings". After purchasing Barnum & Bailey in 1907, their two circuses had more elephants than any other show in the world. The superintendent of elephants on *The Greatest Show on Earth* in 1909 was Harry Mooney, an Englishman who had been hired by James A. Bailey during the European Tour. When Barnum and Bailey opened their season in Chicago that April, the *New York Clipper* praised the elephant act:

"These animals went through the old familiar stunts and introduced several new ones, particularly those of Mooney, who did a musical act with the usual bells on their legs, and then played trumpets to the delight of the crowd."²⁹



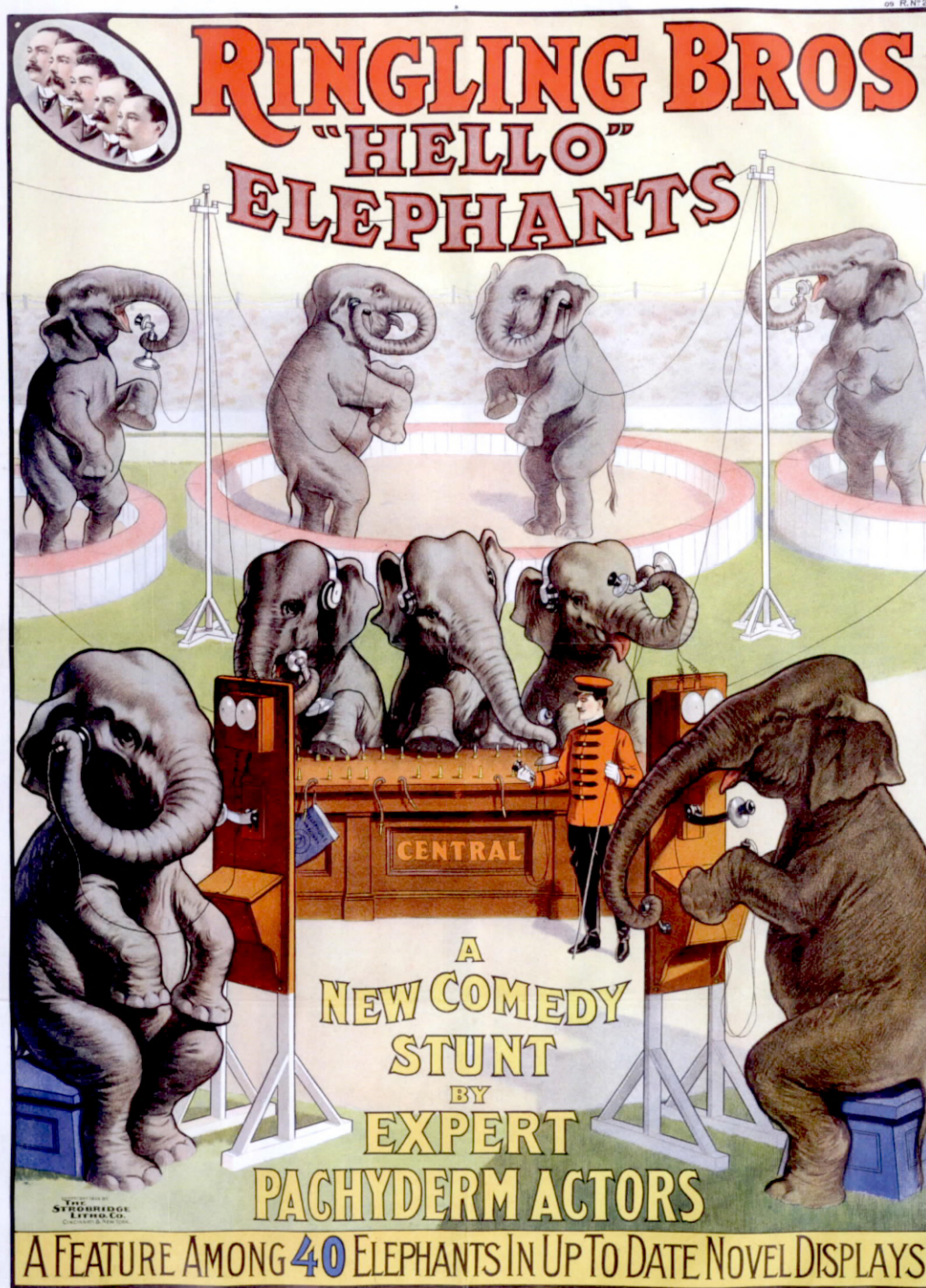
Strobridge Lithographing Company,
half sheet, 1909.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Courier Company, one sheet, 1899.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection





Strobridge Lithographing Company, one sheet, 1909.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Mooney evidently had a way with animals, for in the same year Strobridge produced the artwork, he authored a popular book titled *How to Train Your Dogs*.

While trainer Harry Mooney was conducting his herd of elephants to “play real music in time and tune,” on

Barnum & Bailey, the Ringling herd was also performing astounding feats. Here is how the *New York Clipper* described the act, while reviewing the 1909 performance at Madison Square Garden, the first time that Ringling Bros. World’s Greatest Shows ever played New York:



Strobridge Lithographing Company, half sheet, 1911.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

"For display No. Two, 15 elephants were brought in, five of them going into each ring, and the three groups were simultaneously put through the same feats. They were trained by Earl McClair, "Doc" Kenley and John J. Johnson, and all are so well under control that it would be difficult, indeed, to pick out which is best. These pachyderms play on musical instruments, balance on teeter boards, walk on rolling barrels, play ten-pins, and perform various equilibristic and acrobatic feats that are truly marvelous. A special feature of this act is done by six of the animals, two in each ring. Six enormous telephones are placed by the sides of the rings, phone bells ring, elephants go to the phones and each holding the receiver to his ear, by means of his trunk, bellows a message in the transmitter."³⁰

One of the highly-promoted features of the Ringling

Bros. World's Greatest Shows during the 1911 season was "Tiny Tom Tinker," presented by William Emery. This baby elephant was small and when the circus opened its season at the Chicago Coliseum in April, the following notice appeared in the *St. Anne (Illinois) Record*:

"Tiny Tom Tinker, the baby elephant in the menagerie of the Ringling Brothers circus in the Coliseum building at Chicago, is providing one of the greatest menagerie attractions ever presented. The youngster is so small that a child can lift it. In fact, it is the smallest circus elephant ever exhibited anywhere in the world."³¹

Elsewhere in this issue of *Bandwagon* is a reference to a group of baby elephants who were featured on the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus in 1922 that were billed as "the Tiny Tommy Tinkers," a reference to this attraction



Strobridge Lithographing Company, one sheet, 1913.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

from 11 years prior.

Circus performances and promotion have always had the ability to capitalize on the interests of the public and take daily life experiences to a new level. Whether it was May Wirth turning a somersault on a horse or elephants playing baseball, circus performers transform the ordinary into extraordinary.

In 1913 the New York Giants baseball team was known throughout America as one of the greatest of all time, representing the National League in the World Series of 1911, 1912 and 1913. So it should be no surprise that the same elephants who could play musical instruments and use the telephone could also field a baseball or swing a bat. Near the end of Display 3, Harry Mooney became a baseball coach, and here is how the *New York Clipper* described the act:

"A game of baseball which winds up the elephant number is very amusing. A new feature in this occurs after several balls have been tossed. The el-

ephant pitching has a dispute with his umpire, his trainer, and with his trunk knocks the arbiter out of the ring. The elephant player is forthwith ordered from the "field" and his place is taken by another pitcher. The elephant batting then strikes at the ball and makes a "home run," "sliding" to the home plate. This is a clever exhibition of elephant training and is very interesting."³²

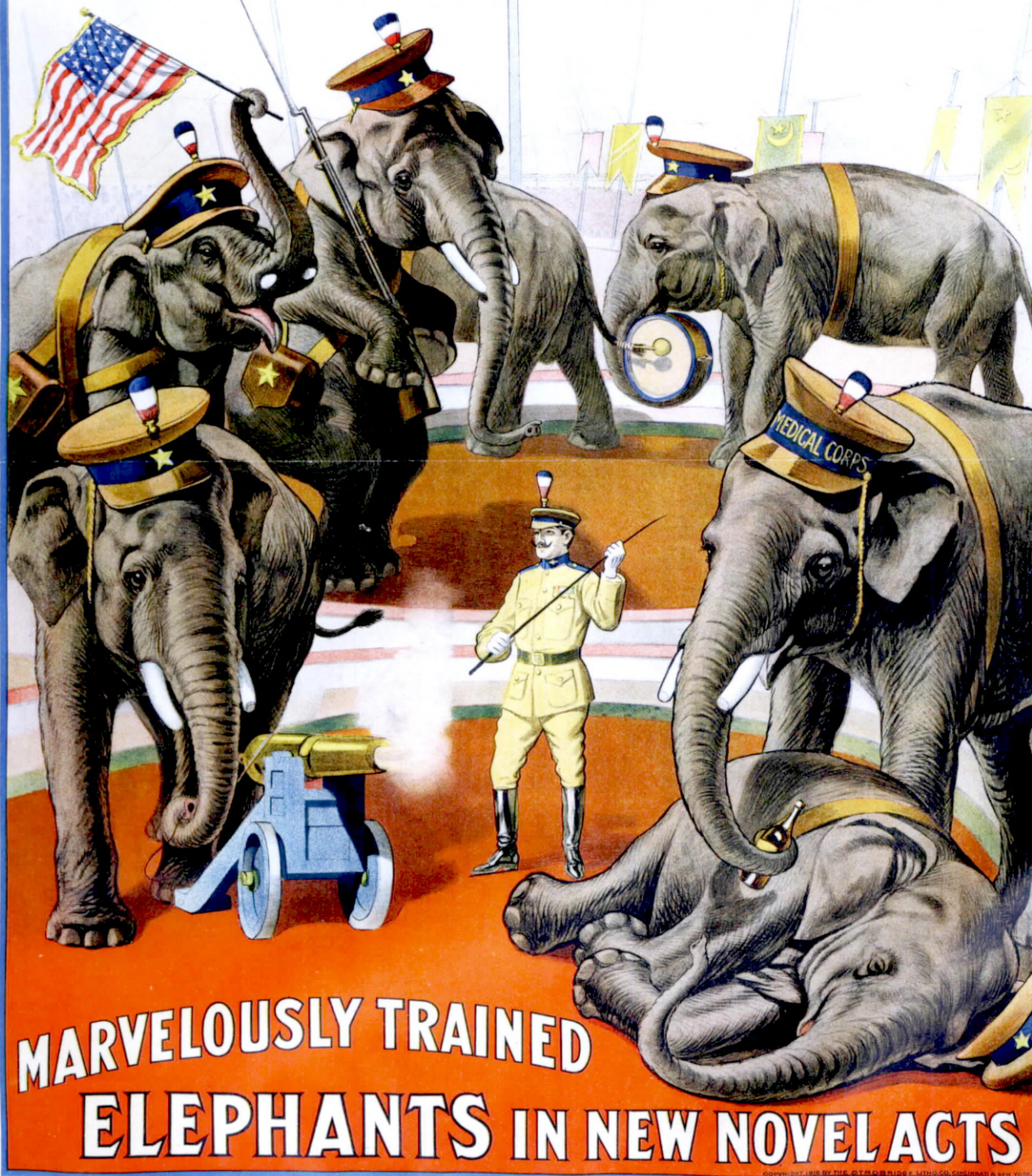
Although the United States had not yet entered World War I in 1916, the nation was preparing for battle and this lithograph clearly shows a scene which conjures up images of the trench warfare that was happening "over there." Military maneuvers on the part of elephants were also seen on Barnum & Bailey during that period with a platoon of pachyderms playing a variety of roles from soldier to drum-

Strobridge Lithographing Company, one sheet, 1916.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

RINGLING BROS

WORLD'S GREATEST SHOWS





Strobridge Lithographing Company, half sheet, 1918.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

mer to combat medic.

Although it would be two more years before the National Football League was formed, in 1918 football was starting to attract the attention of Americans from coast-to-coast. Baseball was still the national pastime, yet elephant superintendent Harry Mooney was once again given the challenge of making athletes out of elephants.

Despite his many years with Barnum & Bailey, Mooney was among those who did not make the transition to the combined shows. After the 1918 season Mooney moved to Australia where he became elephant superintendent on Wirth's Circus.³³

While elephants continue to be a part of circuses around the world, the parade of pachyderms that began with P. T. Barnum's 1850 stunt to promote Jenny Lind came to an end when a group of six Asian elephants completed their act in Providence, Rhode Island May 1, 2016, an occasion superseded only a year later by the final performance of the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus in Uniondale, New York on May 21, 2017.

Over the past 146 years, a dozen generations have watched hundreds of elephants perform at The Greatest

Show on Earth. Year after year these mighty animals traveled from city to city, helping to erect the canvas city and then delighting audiences with their charm and kind dispositions. In the decades since these gentle giants first appeared in a circus ring, they have become one of the most tangible memories of the our own circus experience, due in great measure to thousands of lithographs such as these that were hung in store windows and pasted to the sides of barns. These posters promised all of the wonders of the big show, including the amazing elephants. Over time those posters would be pulled down and thrown away or eventually fall victim to the elements and begin to fade. As a result thousands were lost forever. As circus historians we are the custodians of what has gone before us. The circus lives here. I urge you to keep it alive. **Bw**

Chris Berry's two passions are broadcasting and the circus – though not necessarily in that order. Growing up just outside of Sarasota, Chris had the opportunity to meet some of the great circus stars of the 20th century and the fire was lit. By the time he was 14 Chris was a member of the Circus Historical Society and a regular volunteer at the old Circus Hall

of Fame. Chris' interest in circus history and expertise in the area of circus lithographs blossomed as he was mentored by some of America's most respected circus historians. Following a career with CBS and ABC where he held executive positions in Los Angeles, Washington DC, New York and Chicago, Chris now serves as Senior Vice President at iHeartMedia where he oversees the radio giant's national news operation and manages NBC News Radio, dividing his time between gathering and distributing the news of today, and researching the history of the circus in America.

Acknowledgements

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2. *New York Clipper*, Barnum's Traveling Menagerie, (November 25, 1854), p.2
3. *Barnum*, pp.358-360
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5. *Philadelphia Times*, (March 15, 1879)
6. *New York Clipper*, (April 10, 1880), p.19
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8. *New York Clipper*, Barnum's Latest Scheme (September 11,

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13. *Trumbull (Connecticut) Patch*, Elephants in the Room (April 6, 2015)
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17. *2014 North American Regional Studbook – Asian Elephant* (2014), Page 95
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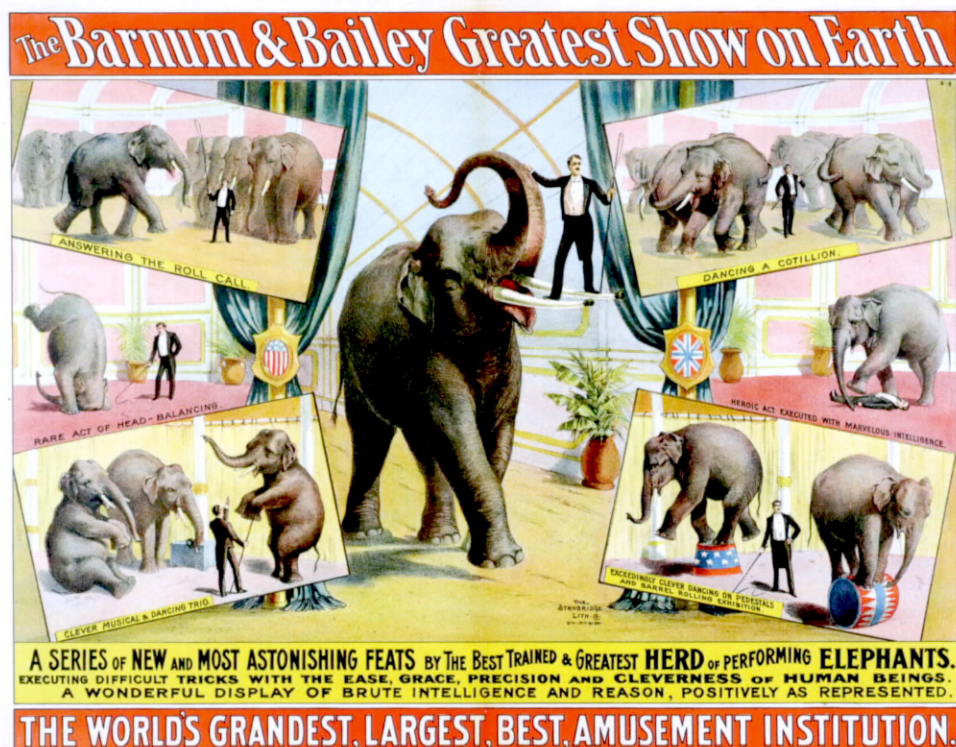
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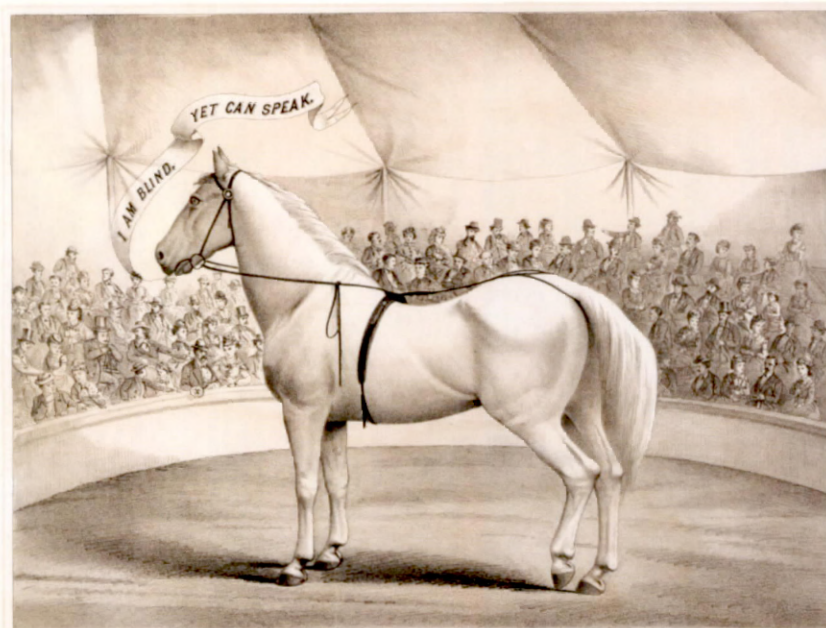
Strobridge Lithographing Company, one sheet, 1892.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



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CIRCUS • SIDESHOW & WILD WEST MEMORABILIA

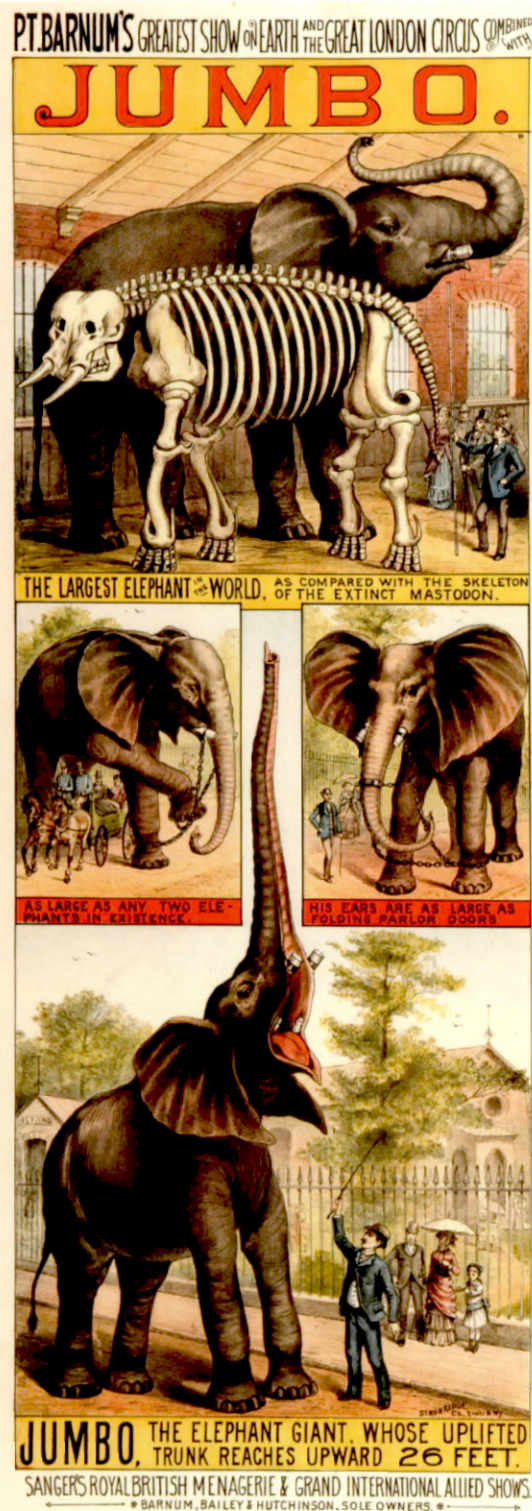


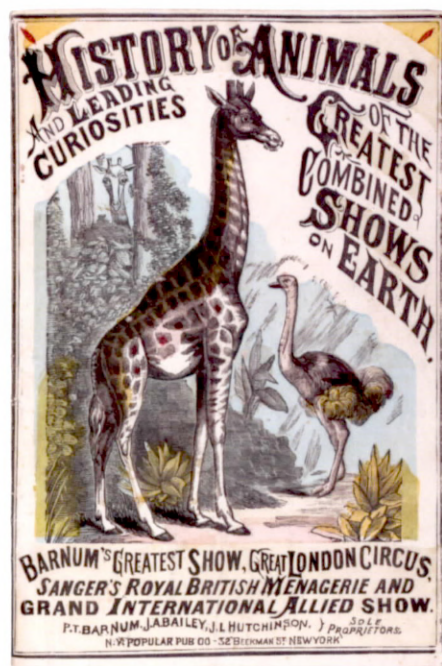
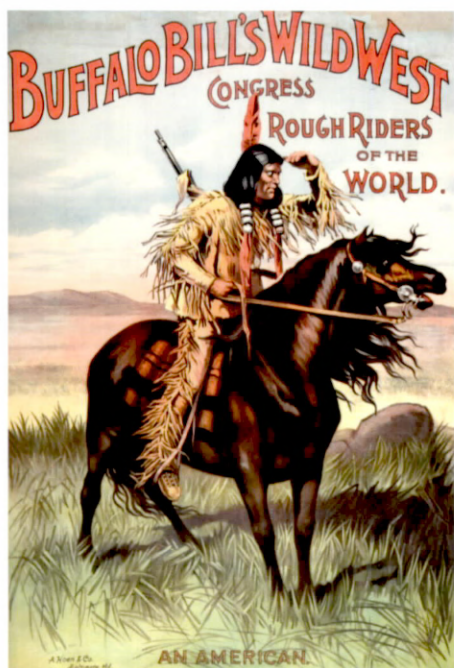
DAN RICE'S BLIND HORSE "EXCELSIOR, JR."



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